

THE DECISION OF A LIFETIME

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"I want you to think of something, Robert. If you'd been married when Herman Kirmse started talking about chasing gold in Alaska, what would you have done?"

"But I'm not married. The problem didn't arise."

"But if you had been—"

"I didn't have to think about it."

Her voice took on an edge. "Apparently it never occurred to you to talk it over with me before you bought your ticket."

He couldn't answer.

DISTANT LOVE, LASTING LOVE

C.O. LAMP



A STAR BOOK

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To the memory of Robert and Mathilda Schoenbeck. Without their diaries, journals, printed speeches, and patience in the sunset of their lives, as they related with clarity events that happened more than half a century before, this book could never have been written. Thanks to Esther Schoenbeck Witter and Adele Schoenbeck Ritter. Special thanks to Rosemary Witter Lamp.

CHAPTER ONE

Gold.

Blood surged through Robert's temples in angry determination. *It don't take two to find gold. I'll go myself.* He shoved the bad-news telegram into his pocket and drew on his coat. It was a blustery spring day in Dubuque. A raw wind swept down the Illinois bluffs, whipped across the Mississippi river, swirled up the valleys and dissipated in the Iowa hills. Normally coal smoke from one hundred thirty-nine factories hung over the brawling river town, but today the air was clean—it had a bite in it.

Robert started down Clay, a street dotted with taverns, dimly lit rooms where patrons still exchanged stories of pirates lurking downstream at Bellevue. He hesitated and looked behind him—in the direction of 1077—the home of Mathilda Nitzsche. No doubt about it, anyone who wanted to marry the daughter of Dr. Frederick R. Nitzsche had to be a man of means. There was no way he could propose marriage if he stayed in Dubuque—not on the wages of a working man. But if he had a fortune in gold, then Tillie Nitzsche could be his.

Get the gold.

Leaning into the wind, he continued down Clay Street to Eighth and waited for a team of prancing

bays on a Mulgrew & Phillips coal wagon to clear the intersection. Cold damp air nipped at his throat but he refused to close the top button. Alaska would be colder, he knew. Cold was something he'd have to live with.

He followed Main, his stride unbroken until he turned into the railroad ticket office on the corner of Fifth. Approaching the barred window, he pulled himself erect. "I'd like a ticket for Sitka, Alaska."

Eyes deep-water blue and unwavering, Robert watched a slow-moving ticket agent consult a collection of charts, maps, and rate schedules.

"We can make connections with the Canadian railroad," said the agent. "But when you get to the coast you'll have to take a ferry to Victoria Island and catch a boat there."

Robert followed the agent's pointing and studied the time schedule. "The boat doesn't sail very often. What if I miss it?"

"Don't worry about that. We'll get you there in plenty of time. I assure you."

Robert paid the fare, folded a yard long streamer of tickets and placed them in his pocket.

On the way back he noticed the string of banks across the street. The Dubuque National on one corner of Sixth, the Second National on the other, the Dubuque County Bank mid-block. A man with money would have a better chance of winning the hand of Mathilda Nitzsche. At the corner of Seventh, a calendar in the window of the Iowa Trust and Savings Bank read March 27, 1889. By the time he returned from the Yukon it might well be 1891. Would Tillie wait two years?

A mile ahead he saw the outline of the Nitzsche house. Why didn't he marry Tillie the day he returned? He shook his head. Out of the question. They

weren't even signed. It simply wasn't done.

He didn't have a ring

His thoughts leaped to Kirmse's jewelry store. He remembered meeting Richard Kirmse's brother, Herman, in the living quarters above the store. Herman—also a jeweler—had come from South Dakota on a visit. "Gold can be scooped up in the Yukon, five or ten cents worth in every pan," Herman enthused. Inspired by his colorful tales, Robert agreed to meet him in Omaha—together they'd go to Alaska and scoop up gold. That was before he received Herman's telegram . . .

He returned to Geiger's Rooming House and late in the afternoon set out, a question on his lips, his mind racing ahead for Tillie's answer. He'd show her the tickets—then there'd be no argument about his going. With that point settled she'd promise to wait.

Approaching the Nietzsche house he twisted the doorbell and heard it clatter.

Mathilda Nietzsche answered its summons. A tiny woman, she seemed smaller than five feet, two inches. Soft brown curls framed a gentle sensitive face easily animated by a great depth of emotion. Her reactions, always a split second delayed, frequently found voice with lyric effect.

"Hello, Rob-bert."

"Hello," he said, wiping off his cap.

She preceded him into the parlor. "It's nice of you to call."

"I received a telegram from Herman Kirmse," he said and handed it to her.

Mathilda read the terse message. I CAN'T SELL OUT CAN'T GO HERMAN KIRMSE. "Ooooooh. He can't sell the store. The trip is off." Sadness clouded her face as she shared his disappointment, but sudden realization brought a smile. "Then you're not going."

Aren't you tired of wandering? Ready to settle down?"

He sniffed. "From Germany I was trying to escape, but to Alaska I'm going *for* something. A fortune in gold . . . and then . . ."

"Tonight is special," Mathilda said quickly. "I'll see if father will play for us." She scampered through a doorway leading to the surgery.

"Tillie, it's important that we talk," he said when she returned. "I'm going thousands of miles—it could take years."

"Would you like wine with supper, Robert?"

"Yes. Thank you. Now can we talk?"

She left the room and he heard her say, "Mama. Poppa says it's all right to serve the wine he got from . . ." Her voice became a blur within kitchen sounds.

Removing his pipe, Robert filled the bowl, taking care not to spill tobacco. Behind him a door opened.

"Ah, Robert." An imposing figure, Dr. F. R. Nietzsche had a long gray beard that flowed over an expansive chest. His eyes, steely gray and penetrating, exuded a certain warmth. "I hear you're leaving Dubuque."

"Yes, sir."

The doctor glanced at his daughter coming from the kitchen. "Alaska has been mentioned around here more than once in the past few weeks."

Mathilda halted abruptly. "I must look after the wine." She turned and ducked out of sight.

"I'd like to talk to her about Alaska," Robert said. "Somehow I get the impression she's avoiding the subject."

"Oh?" The doctor's brow furrowed.

Robert hesitated. Had he already said too much? He paused to consider and felt relieved when Mina called

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Dakota and sells gold jewelry, or the young man who goes seeking gold?"

Robert's eyes met his. "Do I detect a note of criticism?"

The doctor drew a deep breath and tipped back his massive head. "It's not for me to criticize. It was an exercise in philosophy."

It's more than philosophy, Robert thought. The doctor had been unable to conceal the shadow of disapproval in his eyes.

Dr. Nietzsche forced a smile and went on. "It is said that a quick nickel is better than a slow dime. Going to Alaska in search of gold is like traveling to China and risking the future on the turn of a card. It's a big gamble."

"I understand your point, sir, but I disagree. Of course there's a gamble in going to Alaska, but the way I see it, the worst I can do is break even. I have nothing to lose." In the depths of his thoughts he knew he could lose a great deal—he could lose Tillie. Robert moistened his lips. "There's the journey . . . the sight-seeing . . . the adventure. No, I don't see how I can lose."

The doctor chuckled and spoke in his native tongue. "When I was in Germany I heard the streets of America were paved with gold."

"I too heard these stories," Robert replied in English. "Never once did I believe them."

"One thing about people with exciting—should I say notorious—professions," the doctor countered. "They usually die broke. Entertainers get the acclaim but it is the owner of the opera house who dies rich."

"There are those who would say being a doctor is an exciting profession."

"Young man . . ." Dr. Nietzsche shook a scolding finger.

"Come, Poppa," Mathilda urged. "Play for us."

"If you wish."

Robert seized an opportunity. "What a lucky girl you are, Tillie, to have such a wonderful father. Not only does he possess the medical skills of two continents, he is a talented pianist."

Mathilda took her father's arm. "I'm proud of him."

"Well, then," Dr. Nitzsche said. "It behooves me to live up to my reputation. We will honor our world traveler on his last night with us. Where you're going, Robert, there will be no pianos."

Robert placed two red velvet chairs side by side. He and Tillie listened as the doctor began to play a hesitation waltz, a number in which the music stopped for long moments.

Robert took her hand. "I must talk with you."

"Shhh. Not now."

"Now."

"I like this part. The way it stops . . . and starts."

Like my heart? Robert thought. The music halted and he waited for it to resume. "Why can't we talk?"

"You know Daddy likes a respectful audience."

Patience at an end, oblivious to the stopping of the piano, he blurted, "Tillie, are you going to wait till I get back from Alaska to get married or not?"

The doctor's head snapped. Frowning, he leaned into the keys and played with great intensity, his fingers pounding the chords.

Feeling Robert's hand over hers, Mathilda squirmed under his penetrating gaze.

"I won't let you avoid the question," he said gently.

"I—I don't know, Rob-bert. I—I really don't know if I can wait. I'm no longer a child. Already people say I'm an old maid. I'm twenty-three, Rob-bert."

"What!" he exclaimed, fighting for control. "You

think time stands still for me? I'm nearly twenty-eight. That's why it's so important for me to make a fortune. I'm wasting my time here in Dubuque."

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"But I'm not married. The problem didn't arise."

"But if you had been—"

"I didn't have to think about it."

Her voice took on an edge. "Apparently it never occurred to you to talk it over with me before you bought your ticket."

He couldn't answer.

She completely yielded the point by going on. "I don't want to think about you taking the trip either." She made a fist and covered her mouth in a totally childlike gesture.

He rose, feeling helpless and self-conscious. His hands became awkward and he shoved them into his pants pockets. "Well, I won't be seeing you for a while . . ."

"I'm going to miss you, Robert."

"And I you."

Mina came in and began tatting, looping the thread on a hand shuttle, pretending to ignore them.

Robert sat down. "I know I have no right to ask you to wait . . . such a long time."

Dubuque temporarily cast off, he tingled to the excitement of going to the Yukon. His head came up. He stepped out smartly and never looked back.

Waiting at the railroad station the next morning, he engaged in the extravagance of a ten cent cigar. He finished the cigar on board.

The early morning train chuffed northward. Sometimes the conductor came by and punched his ticket. At other times he removed a segment. Not long after the string ran out Robert found himself aboard a ferry bound for Vancouver Island.

Arriving in Victoria, he questioned a shipping company official.

"The boat for Sitka—when does it leave?"

"You just missed it." The man gestured toward a disappearing dot on the horizon, a thin trail of smoke dissipating in the wind.

"But the ticket agent assured me—"

The man laughed.

"Do you have a timetable?" Robert got the question out over frustration, disappointment, and anger.

"Timetable's no good up here."

"Well, do you know when the next ship sails for Sitka?"

"Sure. A little while after it gets here." The man laughed again.

Gradually Robert's anger subsided. Unable to continue his journey, he waited impatiently for more than a week before the steamer *Ancon* put in.

Finally, on April 12, the *Ancon* headed north. At first the steamer made good progress, but above Fort Wrangel they encountered rough water. The ship pitched and rolled wildly; the bow dipped into a trough, heaved to a crest and hung there shivering, timbers creaking. Caught by an unruly wave, a sudden lurch flung Robert against a lashed-down

drum.

"Hang on, Cheechako," yelled one of the two dozen passengers.

"Cheechako?"

"It means tenderfoot—greenhorn," the man said.

Robert caught his balance on a rail. "It shows that much?"

"Aye. Ye look a little green."

"Is it always this rough?"

"Aye. You're in the Wrangle Narrows—the graveyard of the Pacific."

The ship heeled to avoid a boulder. Robert managed to maintain his footing.

"You're getting your sea legs," the man said with approval. "There's a killer tide hereabouts. Ships only ply these waters at high tide."

Another man joined the conversation. "I see both the captain and the pilot on the bridge."

Robert raised his gaze and saw the pair struggling with the wheel.

"Where ye bound?"

"Sitka. When I get outfitted I'm heading inland. I'm going to try my hand at prospecting."

The man shook his head. "No use you gettin' off at Sitka. Anybody who goes inland gets outfitted in Juneau."

Robert hesitated. "I'm thinking of trying the Yukon."

"Yukon?" The man's head came up sharply. "You can't go to the Yukon now. The season's too far along. The snow's 'most gone. If that's where you want to dunk a pan, I'd advise you to wait till next spring."

"Aye."

"An' mebbe think about gettin' yourself a partner."

"It's a long trek in there. More'n a thousand miles. By the time you get where you're goin' it's time to

turn around and come back."

"Why don't you throw in with us? We're all miners from Treadwell. You can earn bread 'n' beans."

Robert considered. "Yah," he said. "I think I will."

When the *Ancon* docked, all the miners checked in at the same hotel and the next morning Robert accompanied them to Douglas Island.

An official of Treadwell Mines regarded him briefly.

"Sixty dollars and board. Take it or leave it."

"I'll take it," Robert said.

He was directed into a tunnel and told to load newly dynamited rocks into small railroad cars. Once loaded, the cars had to be pushed laboriously toward daylight. Although the men were garbed in oilcoats and boots, by day's end they were drenched to the skin.

At the end of a long grueling day the nearly two hundred miners retired to a bunkhouse and withdrew into their own miseries. A few of the men tried to sing while others cried. Robert listened to a man snoring in the next bunk. From a distance he heard a muttered prayer. Overcome by melancholy, his heart hung like a rock. He'd never worked so hard in Germany. Remembering his father, a tyrant who called him foul names and beat him unmercifully, he had to admit that life at Treadwell was worse. In a vague dispassionate way his father cared for him, wished him to be healthy in body and spirit. *Yah, he wanted me to be strong so he could work me.*

Here no one cared. *Nobody gives a damn.*

When his anguish gave way to exhaustion he fell asleep.

Work continued at a dreary pace, the blasting and removal of ore creating a danger of cave-in and collapse. To shore up tunnel walls, timbers were

glad to be alive," he shouted. The men did care about each other!

By the end of the day he was limping. The next morning his foot was so badly swollen he couldn't begin to pull on his boot.

"Report to the steward," said the foreman. "You can help him mix flapjacks and peel potatoes."

For a week, while the swelling in his foot subsided, Robert sat beside a stack of burlap bags filled with potatoes. As he peeled, he thought of the night he visited Tillie Nitzsche, hoping to win her promise. She said she'd wait for a year, but with his trip to the interior delayed he'd be gone at least two years. Would she wait for him that long? Would she . . . ?

The steward saw him sitting there, knife and potato motionless in his hands, staring into space.

"Hey, Schoenbeck. You daydreaming?"

"Oh." Robert snapped out of his reverie. "I was just thinking of Dubuque."

"Dubuque?" The steward chuckled.

"Yah." Robert learned that at the very mention of Dubuque some people laughed.

"Mr. Reed sent word that he's looking for a good man to help him at the store and hotel. I told him about you, Bob."

"I'm obliged."

"Seein' how your foot is better . . ."

Robert set out for Juneau at once. He took the job at Reed House.

In six weeks autumn sharpened to winter. Treadwell Mines closed for repairs and the men from Douglas Island poured into town looking for work but there were no jobs to be had. They waited for a ship.

When it appeared on the horizon a man flung open the door of Reed House and burst in. "Steamboat!" he cried. "Steamboat!"

Everyone bolted for the door. The last to leave, Robert latched it behind him. Nearby gambling dens and dance halls emptied, patrons streaming to the wharf to meet the once-a-month steamer from Seattle.

No matter what time of day or night the boat docked and heedless of the weather, everyone came to watch. For Robert, business preceded pleasure. It was his duty to bring passengers to the hotel. As they walked down the gangplank he went into his spiel. "Welcome to Reed House. The finest accommodations."

Night after night, while a cold wind howled outside, men clustered around the pot-bellied stove, mostly old men, pioneers who crossed the plains in prairie schooners in forty-eight, goldrushers who stampeded to California in forty-nine and fifty. They regaled each other with stories of their youth, fictional and factual.

"I recollect I was punching bulls in forty-nine, crossing the—"

A man who'd heard the story before turned to a friend. "I hear there's a new strike up on the Hootalinqua."

"Yeah. I hear it's a big'un."

Robert perked up his ears.

Gold.

CHAPTER TWO

1890

Gold lay in the riverbed of the Hootalinqua, and with Dawson as his partner, Robert knew they would find it—Dawson had been to the Yukon before. Together they planned to leave Juneau on the first day of March, start up the Taku River and work their way overland to the Hootalinqua. So popular was their plan that eight others asked to join them.

On the day of embarkation the eight were ready, but Robert and his partner were not. Long-faced and dejected, Robert watched them stowing their gear on sleighs.

"Too bad about Dawson," one of the men said.

"You can still throw in with us," offered another.

"No," Robert said, surprised that he was so calm when inside he churned with disappointment. "Dawson and I struck up a partnership. I can't leave without him."

"That old sourdough won't stay down long, that's fer dang sure."

"I hope not."

"He'll be out of bed soon. I hear you two are going over the Chilkoot."

"Yah. Since Dawson came down with the fever we've been talking things over. We've changed our plans. We're going to try the pass."

"Seven days to come a hundred miles—for this?" Carter complained, still seasick.

They threw their supplies on the ice, the *Dutchman* reversed her sternwheel and backed off.

"It's no good," Shaw said. "Bad luck. We've got a bad luck start."

"Yeah? How can you tell?"

"By the signs. You can always tell how a trip will turn out by looking at the signs in the beginning. I tell ya, Carter, we never shoulda throwed in with a guy who got sick. That was a bad luck sign right off."

Robert's stomach cramped. Shielding his eyes with a mittened hand he pretended to stare into the distance. Bad luck from the beginning? He didn't dare tell them about his bad luck beginning—Herman Kirmse sending a telegram saying he couldn't sell his jewelry store, missing the boat at Victoria. Certainly bad omens.

"You gonna stand around like moon calves?" Dawson barked as waves came lapping toward their provisions. "Get a move on or this stuff'll be under water. The tide comes ripping in here faster'n a lobo wolf on the trail of a gut-shot moose."

Silently they labored moving three thousand pounds of goods above high water mark. A number of curious Indians came to watch, dour-faced Chilcoots and stern-faced Chilkats.

"Is Healy here?" Dawson asked. Turning to Robert he explained, "Healy runs the trading post."

"Nuh," came a grunted reply. "Him Wilson." The Indian turned his face toward a man approaching.

"Did I hear my name?" said the man who walked up. "I'm Wilson. Say, you boys are a sight for sore eyes. You're the first bunch heading over the pass."

"That don't say much for us," Dawson said.

"Good time to start," said Wilson. "We've had a

tioned.

"Listen, you pack through this country, you'll know how far it is."

"The trail's getting steep," said Shaw.

"Wait till you see the last mile. It's straight up."

By the end of the second day they had moved their goods another three miles and relocated the camp. All afternoon the clouds had roamed, banged heads, fused and darkened as they piled higher over the St. Elias Mountains. By late afternoon the cotton-candy puffs skidding across a lackluster stage of sky had become dark draperies, dropping down now as if to close a three-act tragedy. Great wet fluffy flakes came catapulting out of a leaden sky, cutting visibility to a few yards.

"Stack it. Stack it high, boys. Mark it with a pole and leave it," Dawson commanded. "Let's get back to camp. There's wind behind this."

Snow stung their faces.

"It's supper in Seattle tonight, boys," Dawson yelled above the gale.

"Seattle, hell."

"Seattle is as close as you'll come to supper."

Huddling in the windswept camp, they bit into dried fruit and stale biscuits. The storm brought darkness early. As night closed over them Dawson lifted a sheet of canvas to reveal a bed of spruce boughs. He prepared his bedroll, crawled in and watched with a grin as the others shook snow off newly cut boughs, sweeping and cussing as they tried to keep ahead of the storm. "They tell me there's a nice hotel in Seattle," he deadpanned.

"Shut up," grumbled Shaw.

Robert prepared his bedroll the way Dawson taught him. He folded his blanket and tucked in the flap so the wind couldn't blow it open and expose his face.

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Robert prepared his bedroll the way Dawson taught him. He folded his blanket and tucked in the flap so the wind couldn't blow it open and expose his face.

Unable to sleep, shivering as the temperature continued to drop, his thoughts became ominous. *I wonder when they'll find our bodies? Is it true that a man just sleeps away when he freezes to death? Got to stop thinking this way.* He clenched and unclenched his fingers . . . rubbed his sides. *Feels a little better. Dawson isn't worried. He was laughing, cracking jokes. Surely he would have said something if we're in real danger. Sure. Maybe he doesn't know. No. Dawson is a veteran. The snow's building up over me. I wonder how many feet I can stand before I get crushed? A layer of snow is supposed to be warmer. The Esquimaux build igloos. If they can stand it so can I. It does feel a little warmer. Is it true a man feels warmer just before he dies? Freezing again. Feels as if my pores are all clogged with ice. Feels better when I draw myself together and don't shiver.*

Snow continued to fall. The temperature plunged—Robert felt bitter cold, the cold of fifty degrees below. Frightened, worried, and exhausted, at length he dropped off to sleep . . .

He awakened with a start, his body tensed from sudden stimuli. Had something wakened him? He grimaced to cold and stiffness. As he gently lifted the cover, powdery snow sifted down on his face, shocking his neck. Arms flailing, he burrowed his way to daylight. He blinked hard, momentarily blinded by the brilliance as the sun's rays caught the frost-kissed surface, sending up the iridescent glitter of diamonds.

First light of dawn revealed a scene of crystalline splendor. Boughs hung motionless, heavy with snow. Neither man nor beast stirred in the eerie white stillness. The master painter used dark tones, a hint of black or green, to represent trees struggling to assert themselves. Dramatic, almost maddening white

strokes swept from base to summit, capped with an icy blue sky free of clouds, a sky devoid of all warmth. A reluctant sun bulged with confidence at the eastern rim, glowing futilely, a dazzling deception in this blazing white hell. The temperature dropped another three degrees.

"Hey! Anybody!"

Dawson stirred. Then Carter. Then Shaw.

"How cold is it?" Carter asked through chattering teeth.

Dawson turned his face into the wind and inhaled slowly. "Forty below."

A report like a gunshot echoed across the canyon.

Carter's head jerked. "What's that?"

"Who's shooting?"

"Spruce saplings," Dawson said. "After a couple warm days the sun causes the sap to rise. When it gets cold like this, the tree explodes."

Their moccasins were frozen stiff.

"Get a fire going before your fingers freeze," advised Dawson.

Robert clenched his teeth. His feet cried out against the icy moccasins. The only dry kindling lay in their beds. He used the boughs he'd slept on but his fingers stiffened before the fire started.

"Cook us up a big one," Dawson said. "Whilst I start digging out."

"Goddamn the Chilkoot," Carter muttered. His curses of the pass may have been among the first; they would not be the last.

As they crowded around the fire, eating a hot breakfast, Dawson winked. "Sure as hell beats breakfast in Seattle, don't it?"

"Sure does," Bob agreed.

"Smear charcoal from the fire on your cheeks and around your eyes," Dawson advised. "It"

from getting snow-blind."

Wearing snowshoes to break a trail, they worked their way up through a gorge, packing their supplies above the timberline. All vestiges of spruce and pine vanished.

"This is Sheep Camp," Dawson said. The gorge spread out into a meadow, a broad valley hemmed in by two-thousand-foot walls of scintillating blue ice. "There used to be mountain sheep around here. Here's where the sheep hunters camped."

"No wonder I feel like a damn sheep," growled Shaw.

"You'll feel more like a mule before we're through," Dawson said. "Boys, we've got six miles to the summit. You'll only be able to pull a hundred pounds from here on. It'll take you five hours to reach the base of the glacier. You'll be gut-sore when you get there, but what a ride back. I'll show you some coasting that'll blind your eyes."

"I'm damn near snow-blind now."

"Listen to that damn glacier grinding," Carter said.

The milli-ton mass of slow-moving ice creaked and groaned as it relentlessly crushed rock into pebbles.

"It's a live one," said Dawson.

Every time they struggled to drag a hundred pounds to the foot of the glacier they leaped on their sleds, let out a yell and hurtled down the slope at breakneck speed. The only way to guide the sled was by leaning and that had little effect. Cold wind whistled past Robert's face and stole his breath. At once his eyes filled with tears. Not only thrilled, he was half scared to death.

At the bottom in minutes, the wearying task of pulling the sled back up the slope had to be repeated. They were pulling the last load into camp when a party of bedraggled Indians approached.

where have you been this last month? *Pluto*, perhaps? Diablo, sweetheart, is the name of Tomas Court's new production company, and Tomas Court, white hope of American movies, is going to be *at* this party, Lindy, my dear. In person. Himself. Or so Lulu claims, Lulu not being one thousand per cent reliable, of course.'

Lindsay digested this information. She had her pride.

'Markov,' she said firmly. 'I have no intention of going to this party.'

'You're intrigued; admit you're intrigued. Lulu's hooked you. I knew she would.'

'The hell she has. Lulu? That has to be the silliest name I've heard in years . . .'

'She used to be called Pandora . . .'

'That doesn't make it better, it makes it worse. Markov, I don't go to this kind of party on principle. Life's too short.'

This remark, as Lindsay instantly realized, was a mistake. A smile curled around Markov's lips. He finished his post-lunch coffee, then made his conversational pounce.

'Do you want to change your life, or not?' he began. 'Because I seem to remember, honeychild, that last month, or like the month before *that*, you said—'

'I can remember what I said.'

Lindsay hastily rose to her feet. She edged across to the window and looked down at her familiar London street. Leaves whirled in an autumnal wind; the sun shone; the weather had an optimistic look. Backing away from the window, she thumped a cushion or two into place, tidied up the already tidy pile of Sunday newspapers, surveyed the detritus of the lunch table, fetched the coffee pot, and poured herself another cup of coffee she would not drink.

She had hoped that one of these aimless activities might deflect Markov; none did. With buzz-saw determination, he stuck to the point.

'Age was mentioned,' he was continuing, still with that maddening smile on his face. 'Career was mentioned. Domicile was mentioned. I suspect the term "empty-nest syndrome" came up . . .'

Lindsay gave a groan. One of Markov's least pleasant traits was his perfect recall of past conversations. Could she actually have used that trite phrase 'empty nest'? Surely she had not sunk as low as 'syndrome'?

'I was drunk,' she said. 'If I said that, which I doubt, I must have been drunk. It doesn't count.'

'Bad news, sweetheart. You were stone cold sober . . .' Markov paused. 'Angry, though. Fierce. You positively *trembled* with resolution. I was moved, Lindy. I was impressed . . .'

'Will you stop this?'

'"I am sick of being a fashion editor" – that's what you said. "I am sick of the fashion world." You were going to talk to that editor of yours. Have you talked to that editor of yours?'

'What, Max? No, not yet.'

'Fresh woods and pastures new – you quoted that.'

Markov gave a sigh that was very nearly as theatrical as his usual mode of speech. 'Darling, you were having lunch with some publisher man. A *contract* was being dangled. This publisher man – a *very* big wheel – wanted a book on Coco Chanel. You, Lindy, were going to write that book. It was going to be definitive. It was going to make you poor, but never mind that. Has this lunch with the big cheese of British publishing actually happened?'

'No, I postponed it. I need time to think.'

'And then there was the real-estate agent . . .' The buzz-saw hit a higher pitch. 'This guy had two firm potential buyers for this apartment. He was promising a bidding war. He pointed out that this is now a highly desirable area of London, so *if* you sold, you'd make a profit. Not a large profit, I admit, but just enough to buy, or rent, a small hovel somewhere outside London,

in the sticks. In this hovel, you, Lindy, were going to commune with nature. A dog was mentioned, and a cat. Ducks featured, as, I'm afraid, did chickens . . .'

'I never mentioned chickens.'

'Oh yes, you did – at length. Lindy, I can see this hovel now; it had a wood fire, patchwork quilts. In it, serene, scholarly and alone, you wrote your book . . .'

'So? It was just an *idea*.'

'It was never-never land, Lindy. Face facts.'

'I've had a few set-backs, that's all. That estate agent was fired. I haven't had time to look at any hovels yet, but I'm going to. I . . .'

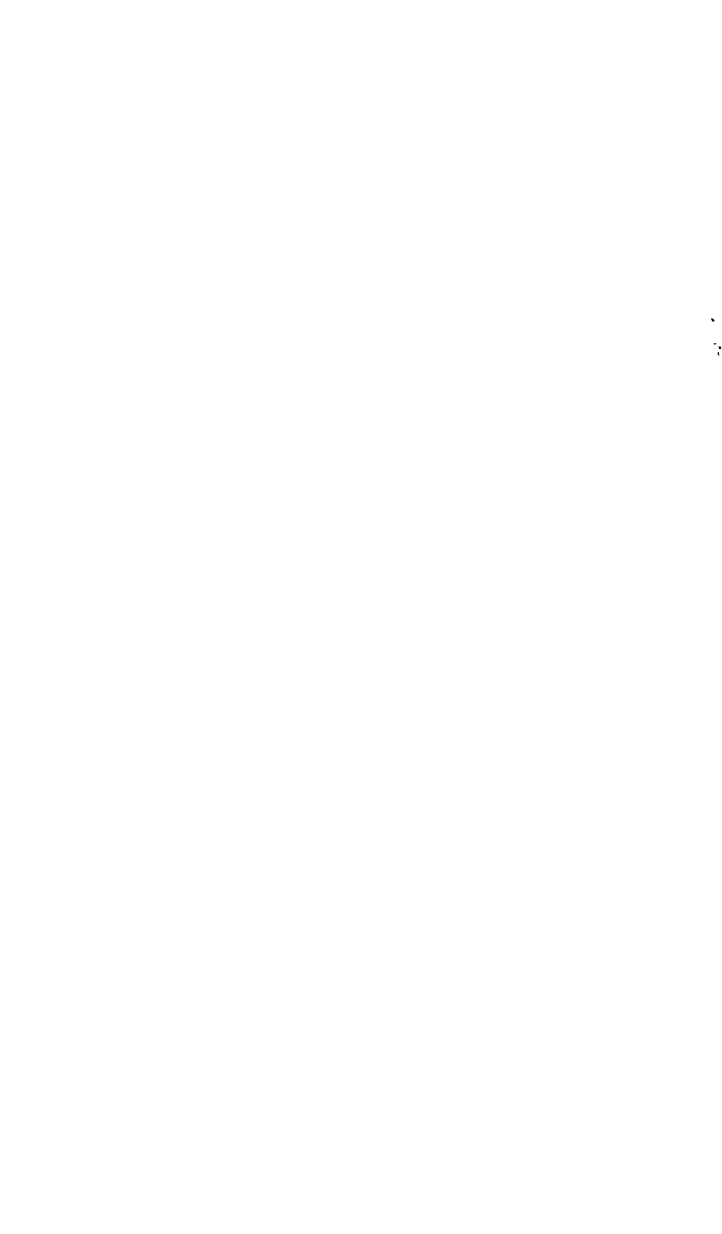
'And when you described this idyll, Lindy, was I unkind? No, I was not; I was encouraging, patient. And why? Because I knew the *real* reason behind this sudden desire to up sticks and change your life . . .'

'Will you stop this? Markov, that's *enough* . . .'

Lindsay sank her head in her hands. She was beginning to regret, deeply regret, having asked Markov and his lover Jippy to Sunday lunch. She had done so partly because she was fond of them both, partly because they happened to be in London, and mainly because Sunday, that family day, was now the hardest, the loneliest, the most interminable day of the week.

With a sigh, she raised her head and inspected her pleasant and familiar sitting-room. This apartment had been her home for eighteen years; formerly, it had been occupied by Lindsay, her son Tom, and her difficult mother, Louise. Now difficult Louise, astonishingly, had remarried and moved out; Tom was in his second year reading Modern History at Oxford. Thanks to their absence, the room was depressingly tidy. Markov and his friend Jippy, who was sitting beside him, but remaining silent as always, would soon be leaving; then the apartment would also be depressingly quiet. Lindsay feared this.

Even that quietness, however, ~~might~~ *might* be able to



years ago, I thought we could bring him around, make him see sense. I put a lot of time and energy into that project, Lindy, if you remember . . .'

'I do remember. Much good it did.'

'Precisely. *Nada*. Zilch. So the time has come, Lindy, my love, to cut your losses. You have to hitch a ride, darling, to a different city on the highway of life . . .'

'Markov, *please*. Give me a *break*.'

'And you have to leave that son of a bitch behind in the parking lot. Am I right or am I right?'

'You're right, and he isn't a son of a bitch; he's good, he's kind, he's clever, he's handsome, he's nice.'

'He's *blind*.' Markov became stern. 'What you need, Lindy, is some McGuire antibiotic . . .'

'I *know* that. I'm administering it. I'm in mid-cure right now . . .'

'You are? And when does this cure cease?'

'The end of the month. This month. I've set myself a deadline, Markov. Truly . . .'

This reply, forced out of her, was another mistake – as Lindsay almost immediately realized. A crafty little smile curled about Markov's lips. Next to him, the silent and gentle Jippy gave a sigh. His eyes fell on the pink mirror-writing invitation card, abandoned on a table. Markov at once picked it up.

'This party', he said, with emphasis, 'takes place on the last day of this month. All the more reason to go. You can celebrate your new-won freedom, for a start. You can meet new people, make new friends and kick-start your new improved McGuireless life.'

'Thanks, but no thanks.'

Lindsay took the proffered card and tucked it back in the pocket of Markov's chartreuse-coloured jacket. Then, since she knew that beneath Markov's affectations of speech and dress, his intentions were kindly, she patted the pocket and gave him an affectionate kiss on the cheek.



could look older, considerably older – as if he had been around for centuries, Markov said.

Unlike Markov, who was flamboyant, Jippy cultivated anonymity of dress. Today, as usual, he was wearing clean, pressed blue jeans, a navy-blue sweater which a schoolboy might have worn, and a white shirt. His old-fashioned lace-up shoes were smartly polished, and, in a way Lindsay found heart-breakingly sad, he always looked spruced up, as if for a job interview – his expression, shy and somewhat hopeful, dogged but melancholy, suggesting it was a job Jippy was never going to get. He would have passed in a crowd without anyone's giving him a second glance – indeed, Lindsay suspected that he preferred and intended this – but on closer inspection, he conveyed a powerful and disconcerting benevolence. Quite how he did this, Lindsay could not have said, since the benevolence seemed to radiate from him, without visible source, unless it be his eyes, the gaze of which was steady, as if expecting the best in others, and yet sorrowful – or so Lindsay thought.

Jippy's origins were in many ways obscure: Lindsay had never discovered his true name, where he lived or what he did before meeting Markov, or indeed how they had met. His ancestry, however, was for some reason elaborately exact. He was one half Belorussian, one quarter Armenian, one eighth British and one eighth Greek – on this issue, Jippy was emphatic, even pedantic. He was Markov's photographic assistant as well as his lover, and according to Markov, he was a genius of the darkroom, indispensable to Markov's latest experiments with silver and platinum prints. Lindsay knew virtually nothing else about him, except for one key piece of information, which, true, or untrue, Markov always stressed. He claimed that, from the Armenian grandmother, Jippy had inherited second sight.

He was a gifted astrological interpreter, Markov said;

held in some Dockland's loft, in a part of London she knew well, having once worked for a newspaper whose grim and fortified offices lay very close to this venue in Wapping. It was miles from where she lived, in Notting Hill Gate; she was sure to get lost in those eerie ill-lit riverside streets. It would be dark; it would be Hallowe'en; she would almost certainly have to park miles away and then venture past gloomy wharves, threatening alleyways, at the end of which, by mud and slippery, weedy steps, the Thames sucked and washed . . . She gave a small involuntary shiver. 'I know you both mean well,' she began, 'but I *really* don't want to go. It's a Friday; I have to go to Oxford to see Tom that weekend. It's just before the New York collections, so I'll be getting ready for New York and I'll have a mountain of work . . .'

Jippy made a gesture, a tiny, quick motion of the hand. He patted her arm and smiled, and began to lead Markov towards the door.

'S-see how you feel,' he said, 'on the n-night.'

'Oh, all right, I'll think about it,' Lindsay conceded, 'if you both promise to go to it too. Markov, you might as well leave the invitation . . .'

Jippy smiled broadly. Markov smiled broadly.

'In your left pocket, I think you'll find, Lindy,' Markov said, opening her front door, exiting fast and shutting it with a smart click.

Lindsay had forgotten Jippy's other skills: his sleight of hand, his conjuring tricks, his ability to convey solid matter from that place of concealment to this. She put her hand disbelievingly into the pocket of her jacket. It closed over the pink, mirror-writing invitation to a party. She still had no intention of going, she told herself, and over the next two intervening weeks she constantly reminded herself of this.

The two weeks were active ones. During them, she discovered something unpleasant: she began to realize

she noted, fought a brief battle for possession of this prize in the middle of the street.

Then, over an hour and a half late, and thoroughly rattled, she set off in her small car eastwards. Lindsay was a bad driver, and her sense of direction was dysfunctional. This fact had often been remarked upon, amiably and laconically, by Rowland McGuire. Even in his absence, Lindsay was determined to prove him wrong. She failed; as she had predicted, she lost herself in the dark streets of Docklands almost at once.

This entire, huge, confusing loft space, with a bewilderment of metal stairways; jutting, galleried upper decks: dark archways which might lead somewhere or nowhere, was lit by candles. In the centre of the deck, or floor, was a lipstick-coloured couch, to which party-goers clung like a life-raft, and thrumming up through her feet, she could sense some mysterious energy, like the power of a whirring turbine, buried deep in the bowels of a ship. The throb and pulse of this power source had a propulsive effect. Lindsay felt it was propelling her through the dark and the smoke to some vital but as yet undisclosed destination. She felt she would surely arrive somewhere eventually, but meanwhile she felt unstable, not too sure of her balance, and faintly sea-sick.

She peered up at the landmark of the tall Dracula man. He had just avoided being speared by his fat neighbour's cocktail stick and was looking down at Lindsay with a mad desperation.

'I can't hear,' he shouted. 'You cannot hear a god-damn thing in here . . .'

'The *Thames*,' Lindsay yelled, with equal desperation. 'I said, this place is very hard to find, isn't it? I nearly drove into the *Thames* twice . . .'

The pale man, she perceived, was not interested in this. He was not interested in Lindsay either, but – hedging his bets – he was not yet prepared to be uninterested. She could already see that he had an acute case of party squint, partly caused by alcohol, she suspected, but also caused by visual dilemmas.

It was not easy to keep one eye perpetually on the entrance doors, in case *someone* came in, while keeping the other eye on two hundred guests, all of whom kept milling back and forth, and any one of whom might be (several certainly were) *someone* as well. Nor was he prepared to cast off Lindsay yet; she too, after all, might turn out to be *someone*, though he seemed to find that possibility unlikely. He performed another periscopic

manoeuvre – a process assisted by the length of his neck – then, with an irritable frantic air, bent one eye upon her from a great height.

'Fog,' he shouted. 'This room is full of fucking *fog*. Why has Lulu opened the fucking windows? I mean, it's *October*. It's *Hallowe'en*, for fuck's sake. What kind of maniac opens the windows in October? The fog comes in off the river. It mists the whole place up . . .'

'If Lulu didn't open the windows,' Lindsay yelled, 'it would be impossible to breathe . . .'

'Ahhh . . .' Momentary hope dawned in his eyes. 'You know Lulu then?'

'Intimately,' replied Lindsay, who had still to identify her hostess, let alone be introduced to her. 'Lulu and I go way back.'

This statement, designed to annoy, had an arresting effect. The pale man's fly-eyes stopped swivelling. He clasped Lindsay's arm in a demented grip, and said something frantic and inaudible, something washed away by the incoming tide of adjacent conversations.

' . . . Is he here?' Lindsay heard, as the conversations ebbed. 'Because fucking Lulu *swore* he was coming . . . Only reason I'm here . . . Have to speak to . . . Urgent . . . Project . . . Script. This man is my *god*. I mean no exaggeration. my *god*.'

'Is who here?' Lindsay shouted back, decoding this.

'Court. Tomas Court.'

'Where? Where?' cried the ponytailed neighbour, as this magic name was uttered. He spun round like a dervish, grabbed the pale man with one hand and Lindsay with the other, spilling champagne down her dress.

'He's here? Did you say Tomas was here?'

'No, I said *maybe* he was here.' The pale man swayed. 'I said Lulu *said* he'd be here. Look, d'you mind fucking letting go of me?'

'Apologies, my friend.' The ponytail stepped back

half an inch, and with difficulty focused upon Lindsay.

'And this is?'

'I don't *know* who this is,' the pale man replied in an aggrieved tone. 'She knows Lulu. She says she knows Lulu . . .' He paused. 'Whereas I've never fucking *met* Lulu. I've been here eight times and I've never met her yet.'

This surprising information seemed to forge an instant bond. The two men embraced.

'Shake, pal.' They shook. 'I'm beginning to wonder, my friend,' the ponytail remarked, in Jacobean tones, 'whether Lulu exists.'

'She says she does.' The pale man turned accusingly to Lindsay. 'Knows her intimately. Friends from way back . . .'

Fixing her with his eyes, in so far as he was able, the ponytail demanded to know where, in that case, Lulu was. 'Because,' he said, swaying like a yachtsman, 'I've been promised an introduction to Tomas. I spoke to a very very close aide of Lulu's called Pat.'

The two men eyed each other.

'Pat? Pat?' The pale man sighed. 'That rings a bell. But there's a lot of aides. Lulu has a *confusing* number of aides . . .'

'True. An ear to the ground, however. On the inside of the inside. On the *ball*. That's Lulu's strength. Elusive, though, my friend. Cancels lunch dates . . .'

'Doesn't return calls. Can't be fucking reached . . .'

'Here tonight though. Definitely here – somewhere. I have assurances. Lulu's here – and so is Tomas Court.'

Lindsay, growing anxious to escape, attempted to edge away, but the group behind her pushed her back. Oblivious to her presence, an expression of demented reverence came upon the pale man's face.

'Tomas Court!' he cried. 'I worship that man. I bow down before him. I say – and I don't fucking care who hears me say it – I say: that man is my god.'

'A director of genius, my friend. No argument. *Dead Heat*?'

'Incandescent. I've seen it fifteen times. A masterpiece. I fucking wept.'

'Pure film, my friend. In a class of its own. Except . . .'

'The spider sequence?'

'Cheap. I would have to say that. Edging towards the cheap.'

'Vulgar?'

'My friend, I'd have to agree. Seriously vulgar. Even jejune. You could say – a mistake.'

'He makes mistakes!' Here, the pale man became very animated. 'OK, it's heresy, but I'll say it: Tomas Court makes mistakes, misjudgements. And *Dead Heat* is riddled with them . . .'

'The end is lousy. *Dead Heat* has a lousy ending. Personally, I have my doubts about the beginning, as well . . .'

'What's your view on the editing?'

'A fucking shambles.'

'Dialogue?'

'Please. I could write better dialogue in my sleep.'

'No heart, my friend.' Ponytail sighed. 'It's all window dressing. Smart-ass movie graduate stuff. Post-modern posturing. *Hommage*. Quotes. Does Tomas Court even *understand* genre, my friend? That's the question I ask myself . . .'

'Understand it? He couldn't spell it.'

'He's sold out, in my view. He's peaked, let's face it. He peaked a while ago. He was a flash in the pan. He . . .'

'Actually, he's over there,' said Lindsay, who had now decided that she disliked these two cabaret artists very much. 'He's over there by the door,' she continued, giving them both the sweetest smile she possessed.

'Don't you see him? By the door, with Lulu.'

She pointed across the room. There, in a thick cluster

by the entrance, stood a tall and dramatically dressed woman of a certain age, who jutted up from the heaving crowd like a gaunt, weatherbeaten lighthouse. None of her companions was Tomas Court, now so famous that Lindsay would have recognized him, and the tall woman was not Lulu Sabatier, but paleface and ponytail deserved punishment, and this woman was, without a doubt, the most terminally boring woman Lindsay had ever met in her life. Grasping Lindsay as she entered, she had pinned her to the wall and gone through her last screenplay scene by scene and comma by comma. Emma was mad about it, she said; Michelle had read it - it was female, female, female - and Michelle had flipped.

'That woman there.' Lindsay pointed again. 'The one in the burnous. That's Lulu. She's been waiting there for Tomas Court all evening. He just came in, a second ago. Sharon Stone was with him, I think . . .'

'Christ . . .' Paleface and ponytail convulsed. Parting the waters, they hit the waves at speed; as some wind in the room took up the cry 'Tomas Court, Tomas Court' a host of back-up vessels surged in their wake. A social tide turned; two, four, ten, fifteen, thirty others caught the prevailing current and made for the beachhead of the burnous. Lindsay, well satisfied, watched this armada with delight. The burnous woman, used to being avoided, greeted her new-found popularity with stupefaction. Lindsay slipped her moorings, shifted behind the now-vacant pillar, and resolved to lie low, over the horizon, out of sight.

She had been at the party less than an hour by then; it felt like a week. Somewhere during the course of the evening, she had lost her grip, and time and age had run amok. A rattled forty by the time she left her apartment, she suddenly turned thirty in the elevator here as, soothed by recondite muzak, she glided up.

speed. Here, she was able to conceal herself from paleface and ponytail and any revenge they might seek. She moved back behind a huge and magnificent swagged curtain, constructed from plebeian sailcloth, but fringed with patrician silks, and, watching the ceaseless ebb and flow, waited for the magic potion – it was Krug – to take effect.

Here, with a view down through wisps and drifts of mist to the sleek black curve of the river, she became calmer. Below her, she discovered, lay a garden, a garden that was subtly and theatrically lit, with a dark central fish pool, clipped topiary shapes, and some pale statuary. She could see a goddess or two, one lacking arms, a lovely blind nereid, and a nymph on a pedestal, who appeared to ward off the attentions of a nearby god. It was an enchanting garden, made the more beautiful by the flow of the river beyond, and she found that the garden – or the champagne – was soothing her. Her age steadied and approached normal; the throb of those mysterious party turbines seemed quieter. Leaning against the iron balustrade across the open window, she inhaled damp, foggy city air. Was she in London? She felt she might have been elsewhere, anywhere. She was beginning to feel like Alice, made tiny enough to enter Wonderland by swallowing the contents of a bottle labelled, 'Drink me', and then made absurdly tall by nibbling a cake.

She thought of Alice, swimming in a lake of her own tears. She thought of Alice, a most sensible girl, stabilizing her size fluctuations by – how had she done it exactly? Lindsay frowned down at the imperceptible flow of the river below, trying to remember – by eating from alternate sides of a mushroom, she thought – and a vivid image came to her of reading this story aloud to Tom when he was seven, perhaps eight. It was a period, she knew, of some background pain, one of the last occasions when her ex-husband, down on his luck and

thrown out by the latest girl, had attempted to come back.

It was probably the time, if she were accurate, when she finally realized, five years after her divorce, that she neither loved nor needed him any more. She could remember looking at him, as he stood in the doorway; she could remember the faint surprise she had felt as she realized that she had loved, married, divorced, and agonized over a man whom she neither liked nor respected; a man who had wasted too much of her time. How *stupid* I was, she had thought, closing the door.

Yes, all of that had been happening; yet now, looking back, she found that those incidents had drifted away, and in their place, anchoring her, distinct as the links of a chain, were her evenings with her son; evening after blessed evening, hour after peaceful hour, in which they shared the fantastic adventures of a Victorian child, encircled by lamplight, absorbed in a story, both of them contented and wanting nothing more.

Over a decade ago, those evenings, now. Sharp as a *oignard*, Lindsay felt the familiar stab of regret. Such a grace did not, and could not, endure; childish things, and even the most adult of children's books, were put away. Children grew up, and now her son's need for her company was diminished and infrequent — as she had always accepted it would one day be.

It would have been consoling, she thought, watching the river flow, to know that someone else did still retain a need for her; the kind of need that accompanies love: a husband, an enduring partner. It would have been easier and less painful, Lindsay sometimes believed, to adjust to her present state had she not had to do so alone. However, alone she was and alone she was likely to remain, and the worst possible way of dealing with that was to indulge in this kind of melancholy introspection. Lindsay pinched herself viciously — one of her cures — and read herself a few bracing lectures. She

up by an impetuous man who grabbed her arm, waved a bottle of pills, and announced he was about to commit suicide; on Lindsay's informing him that, in these circumstances his decision was perfectly understandable, he had a change of heart and decided to have another drink instead.

At last, still nursing a few dregs of champagne, she found herself alone in a corridor, a long white corridor, lined with posters for, and stills from, famous movies: *Casablanca*, *Persona*, *Citizen Kane*, *Gone With the Wind*, *La Règle du Jeu*, *Pulp Fiction*, *Jules et Jim*, *Dead Heat*, *Bicycle Thieves*, *The Virgin Spring* . . . Lindsay had seen all of these films, many with Tom who was a film buff and movie addict. She passed along the display, slowing first at one, then another. She came to a halt in front of the celebrated poster for Tomas Court's third and breakthrough movie, *Dead Heat*, the film paleface and ponytail had been lauding and denigrating earlier.

It showed a still from that movie which had now become so famous it was part of the collective consciousness, imprinted on the minds of almost everyone, whether they had seen the actual movie or not. This scene, reproduced on a million T-shirts, had first been seen by Lindsay some eighteen months before in New York; it had been blown up 30 feet high, and had been hanging the façade of a movie theatre on Madison. A marriage of beauty and menace, she had thought then; she had found it disturbing, and still did.

It was a cunningly lit, rear-view shot of Natasha Lawrence, still Tomas Court's wife when the movie was shot, but divorced from him shortly after its première. She was barebacked, and was framed by a suggestion of a white curtain to her left, and by a blank white wall in front and to the right of her. Lawrence's singularly beautiful face could not be seen; her dark hair was cropped as short as a boy's; her right arm was lifted and pressed against the wall; her left arm was pressed against

her side; a shaft of light slanted against the curve of her spine, below which the picture was cropped.

This image might have been, and in some senses was, an Ingres-like tribute to the beauty and allure of a woman's back, though Lawrence was thinner than any of Ingres's *Odalisques*. The eye was drawn by the exquisite pallor of the skin, by the arch of the slender neck, by the line of the spine; it suggested the skeletal, while celebrating the voluptuousness of flesh. Then, gradually, the eye was drawn by what appeared, at a casual glance, to be some small birthmark or blemish, a small dark patch high on the left scapula. On closer examination, this dark area proved to be neither a blemish, nor a tattoo – most people's second assumption – but a spider, an actual spider, a real spider, of modest dimensions, with delicate legs and black skin. Discovering this, women had been known to shriek and shrink back; Lindsay herself, who could deal with spiders, had felt a certain revulsion. A Freudian revulsion, Tom had later annoyingly claimed; a revulsion Court no doubt intended, Rowland McGuire had remarked, since Court was the most manipulative of directors – and the most manipulative of men, or so it was said.

Looking at this image now, Lindsay felt she saw elements in it which she had missed before; the image, and the very violent sequence from which it was taken – a sequence she had never watched in its entirety, because she always covered her eyes – seemed to her to have a riddling multiplicity of meanings: it could be read both ways, she felt; from the right and from the left.

She was about to pass on towards the stairs, which she could now see at the end of this corridor, and which she hoped, if her navigation were accurate, might lead down to the garden below, when a small accident occurred. Stepping back, eyes still on that poster for

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Looking at this image now, Lindsay felt she saw elements in it which she had missed before; the image, and the very violent sequence from which it was taken – a sequence she had never watched in its entirety, because she always covered her eyes – seemed to her to have a riddling multiplicity of meanings: it could be read both ways, she felt; from the right and from the left.

She was about to pass on towards the stairs, which she could now see at the end of this corridor, and which she hoped, if her navigation were accurate, might lead down to the garden below, when a small accident occurred. Stepping back, eyes still on that poster, for

Dead Heat, she collided with a woman, and – apologizing – swung around. The woman, equally startled it seemed, almost dropped the four laden plates she was balancing, and gave a small cry of alarm.

‘Whoops,’ she said, in a strong Australian or New Zealand accent, as a solitary olive bounced off the plates, rolled along the corridor, and came to rest in front of some bookshelves by the stairs.

Lindsay, guiltily aware that she might now be trespassing, looked the woman up and down. She was tall and gaunt, with a large nose, rabbit teeth, small, round, granny glasses, and an arresting head of long, thick, near-white hair. Despite the hair colour, she was, Lindsay realized, around forty years old, no more. She was wearing what might have been a uniform: a neat black dress with white collar and cuffs, but no apron. Was she a waitress? Lindsay looked at the woman, and then at the plates she was somewhat furtively carrying.

‘Goodies,’ said the woman, following the direction of Lindsay’s glance.

The woman appeared to have raided the sumptuous buffet table Lindsay had glimpsed earlier, through the crowds. Heaped on the plates were cheeses and grapes; there was a large wedge of some spectacular gilded pastry pie, some of the wrens’ eggs, a glistening pyramid of caviar. There might have been some lobster – Lindsay thought she glimpsed a claw – and on the largest of the plates was a cornucopia arrangement of little tarts and cakes and miniaturized meringues, spun-sugar confections, marzipan *amuse-gueules* and tiny black chocolate *petits fours*. Balanced on top of them was a marzipan apple, tinted pink and green, with a clove for a stem; a pretty conceit. This, to Lindsay’s surprise, the gaunt woman suddenly passed to her.

‘Delicious, yeah?’ It *was* delicious. ‘Mrs Sabatier is really pleased with these caterers. She says they’re a find.’

'I expect I shouldn't be here,' Lindsay said, extracting the clove, and, for want of anywhere else, putting it in her pocket. 'I hope this isn't out of bounds . . .'

'No worries.'

'It's just - I used to be good at parties, but I seem to have lost the knack.'

'I don't blame you.' The woman smiled, showing even more rabbit teeth. 'It's pandemonium back there.'

'It is rather.' The woman had begun to move off, and Lindsay trotted after her. 'I was just wondering - I wanted to see the garden . . .'

'The garden?' The woman came to a halt.

'Would Mrs Sabatier mind? I could see it from above. It looked so beautiful. There's all these marvellous statues, a goddess, a nymph . . .'

The woman hesitated, then shrugged.

'I guess it's all right. Mrs Sabatier's gone to bed anyway. She avoids these parties of hers like the plague. And you are?'

'My name's Lindsay Drummond. I work at the *Correspondent* . . .'

 The woman looked her up and down.

'Right. Mrs Sabatier probably wouldn't mind. It's those stairs over there. If you get stopped, if anyone objects, just say Pat gave you the OK . . .'

'Pat?'

'That's me. Really.' She made an encouraging gesture. 'It's fine. The doors are open. You don't need a key.'

As she made this remark, Pat was moving off rapidly again. With Lindsay at her heels, she approached a wall of bookshelves at the head of the stairs. Without further speech, she opened an invisible door in these bookshelves and disappeared. What a cunning piece of *trompe l'oeil*, Lindsay thought, pausing to examine it; why, even the hinges were well-nigh undetectable. She examined the false book spines, amused; then she began to descend the stairs. There, at a turn on a lower landing, she ran into Markov and Jippy at last. They turned back

with her and accompanied her to the garden below, where, Markov claimed, they had been lurking for some while.

'Smart move, huh?' he said. 'It was purgatory up there. Wall to wall jerks. No sign of Tomas Court. We saw you skulking at the window. We waved . . .'

Lindsay was not listening. She was looking around her, entranced. A secret garden, she thought, invisible from the street, invisible from any other building except the one she had just left. Mist drifted across the symmetry of the hedges and settled above the still surface of the pool. It was as quiet as any country garden; she could hear, just, the tidal slap against stone of the river beyond; from above, like the murmur of bees, came muted sounds from the party; no traffic was audible and no roads were visible; across on the far bank of the river, she could just see the outline of some industrial building, bulking as large as a cathedral in the dark. Markov and Jippy had taken her arms; now, Lindsay disengaged herself. She wandered away, touching the stone goddess's crumbling hem, then the base of her ardent god's pedestal. She reached up and touched the nereid's sightless eyes.

'Look, Markov, Jippy,' she said. 'Isn't she lovely? In daylight, I'm sure she's meant to be blind, but the moon gives her eyes. She's looking across the river . . . What time is it, Markov?'

'Nearly midnight. Around midnight, Lindsay . . .'

Lindsay had moved off again. She trailed her hand dreamily over the crisp crests of the topiary hedges and made her way along a path, the river flowing ahead of her, and Markov and Jippy somewhere behind her in the shadows. Perhaps Jippy brought me here for the garden, Lindsay thought; perhaps it was Jippy's companionship that made her feel truly at peace for the first time that evening, for Jippy's presence always calmed.

She stepped through a gap in the hedges and

approached a wooden balustrade. She leaned over it, wisps of mist drifting, then clearing, and looked down at the flow of the tide. The river was smooth and dark, a liquid looking-glass; reflected in it, bending gently then reassembling as the currents moved beneath, she could see the moon, lights like orbs, and an Ophelia-woman, pale and poised on the tide, who looked up at her, half drowned, from some water world beneath.

In the distance, a church clock chimed, then another, then a third. The last minute of the last hour of the last day of deadline month. Lindsay thought of Rowland McGuire, who had felt close, very close, the instant she came out here. She would summon him up, Lindsay decided, before, as she had resolved she would, she said her final and irrevocable goodbye.

Rowland McGuire, this week, was away. Taking his first vacation in a year from the newspaper he edited, he was climbing with friends on the Isle of Skye, or possibly – for his plans were subject to change – he had moved on to join another old friend from his Oxford days, a man who, as far as Lindsay could gather, was associated with the film industry in some way. This man had wanted Rowland to join him in Yorkshire, where he was engaged on some hush-hush project of an undisclosed kind, which – for unspecified reasons – required unspecified assistance from Rowland McGuire.

Scotland; Yorkshire. Lindsay closed her eyes, spinning together these inconclusive strands in her mind. Behind her somewhere, Markov was talking about nothing as usual, and Jippy was walking up and down in a somewhat anxious way. She concentrated. Yorkshire, she felt sure and, since her imagination was on such occasions busy, detailed and compliant, Rowland rose up before her with a visionary speed.

There he was, in some remote place – Rowland liked remote places, and liked to be alone in them. Lindsay discovered he had spent the day on some Etrusque

moor. She could see its crags and its heathers; she could hear a lapwing's cry. She could watch Rowland stride across these wuthering heights: this she did for a while, and very dark, handsome and desirable he looked. Then Lindsay settled him down in an inn by a blazing log fire, an inn delightfully unencumbered by the friend or other inconvenient occupants. Rowland, she found, was reading – well, he usually was. Yes, he was definitely reading, and he was wearing the green sweater Lindsay had given him the previous Christmas, a sweater which was almost exactly the same green as his eyes. She could not quite see the title of his book, a pity that, but she could read Rowland's mind. He was thinking about her; he had just decided that before he turned in, he would give Lindsay a quick call.

'Correct me if I'm wrong,' Markov said, on a plaintive note, 'but is it suddenly arctic out here? Jippy, can you feel the wind getting up? It's *Siberian*. Brrr . . . Like my legs are icy, my nose is icy, my hands . . .'

'Oh, for God's sake, Markov, shut *up*,' Lindsay cried, and concentrated again.

It might have been pleasant had Rowland begun that telephone call with some momentous word – 'darling', for instance, would have done very nicely indeed. Lindsay's imagination, however, had its dry, its legalistic side; it was a stickler for accuracy. Rowland, therefore, did not use this, or any other inflammatory term; he simply addressed her, as he always did, by name.

And then – she could hear his voice distinctly – he told her in a friendly, fraternal way what he had been up to this past week. He enquired as to her own recent activities and announced he'd be returning to London soon. He recommended a book for Tom's Oxford history course. He passed on his best wishes to Tom; then, with less obvious warmth, but a politeness characteristic of him, he sent his regards to Lindsay's difficult mother, whom he disliked, not unreasonably, and to her

mother's new husband, disliked by both Lindsay *and* Rowland, who disparaged him with enjoyment and accord.

These formalities over, he said, as he often did, that it was good to hear her voice, hoped she was well and looked forward to seeing her again soon.

Lindsay disconnected. It was a conversation of a kind she had had with Rowland a hundred times: amusing, polite, concerned, dispassionate, brotherly; these conversations broke her heart. Rowland, of course, did not know that, at least Lindsay was hopeful he did not, for she kept her own feelings well concealed, and had done so now for a long time – almost three years.

Lindsay opened her eyes; the moment felt auspicious. She looked down at her own wavering Ophelia-woman reflection, and wished Rowland a long goodbye. She said her farewell, her final farewell, to the other Rowland, the Rowland she wanted but could not have, the Rowland that inhabited a future that was never going to happen. Let him go, oh let him go, she said to herself, and then, since she wished him nothing but well, she added a rider: that Rowland might find a woman who would bring him the happiness he deserved, and that he would do so yesterday, tomorrow, at once, very soon.

This was a spell, as Lindsay was aware. She could sense its power in the air, but it was important, indeed vital, that effective spells be correctly wound up. Accordingly, she touched wood three times; she crossed and uncrossed her fingers three times, but these actions seemed insufficiently solemn – she felt, obscurely, that some offering or sacrifice needed to be made. And so, hoping neither Markov nor Jippy could see her actions, she opened her small evening bag. Inside it, folded small, was a note written by Rowland McGuire. It was not a long note, nor were its contents – they concerned work – of any great significance, but it was the only specimen of Rowland's handwriting she possessed, and

she had been carrying it around like a talisman for nearly three years. A small square of paper: 'Dear Lindsay,' this note began. If she read it, she knew she would weaken, so she did not read it – anyway, she knew its four-line contents by heart. Leaning over the balustrade, she let this charmed piece of paper fall. It eddied towards her, then away; some current of air caught it, and it settled on the water like a pale moth; she watched it be carried away by the tide.

The gesture made her sad, but she also felt immeasurably lighter, she found. She floated back up the path, arm in arm with Markov and Jippy, Markov grumbling about the cold and Jippy's quiet gaze resting on the flagstones ahead. It was at this point in the evening, perhaps a little belatedly, that Lindsay, glancing at Jippy, wondered if he might have been influencing her once more. It was Jippy, after all, who had suggested Markov procure her the invitation to this party; it was at Jippy's urging that she had kept that invitation, and she began to suspect now that it was Jippy's influence that had weighed with her when she finally decided to

c. It was odd, was it not, she thought, that he and Markov had been in the garden all evening, as if they had been waiting for her there. With Jippy, mainly because his presence was so silent and unobtrusive, it was always easy to forget he was there; it was only after her meetings with him were over that Lindsay sometimes suspected he had *influenced* her in some shadowy way, with some invisible sleight of hand.

Now, drifting back through the garden to the stairs, she had, most strongly, the sensation that Jippy had possibly been guiding her, and that he was certainly guiding her now. This was superstition on her part, she told herself; Jippy did not *do* anything to which she could have pointed in evidence – at least not for a little while. Even so, the impression grew; it was imprecise and hazy, yet it was strong. Jippy's grip on her arm was light; he

guided her back along that white corridor, Markov forging ahead of them both now, and he guided her back through the tides of that party crowd. Lindsay could sense both that he wished to speak and was as yet unable to do so, and that he had a destination in view for her; looking at his pale, set face, she felt sure this destination was close, perhaps just the other side of those entrance doors.

Their passage through the party was not the easiest of odysseys. Caught up in the swirling currents, they were buffeted towards that lipstick-red couch with its limpet men and siren girls; negotiating that, they were accosted, several times, by various ancient mariners wishing to tell various tales. Jippy guided them past these hazards; he paused briefly as paleface and ponytail hove into view, lamenting the latest news, which was that treacherous Lulu Sabatier had organized simultaneous Hallowe'en parties in New York and Los Angeles to celebrate Diablo, and that – ultimate treachery! – Tomas Court was now rumoured to be at one or the other of these.

'But *which*, my friend, *which*?' the ponytail cried.

'I don't *know*,' paleface responded. 'I don't fucking well *know*.'

'If I find Lulu, my friend, I won't be responsible for my actions . . .'

'I'll fucking well *kill* her,' cried paleface, diving into some murky confluence by the doors.

Jippy gave a small gentle smile at this and touched Lindsay's arm. The crowds parted like the Red Sea before Moses, and she and Jippy surged through. Outside, in the peace and darkness of the streets, Jippy and Markov escorted Lindsay back to her car. They walked, footsteps echoing, along narrow cobbled roads, with the dark walls, the rusting winches and traps of abandoned warehouse machinery, rising up on either side. Just audible on the breeze came the slithering sound of river

water against mud; Lindsay could sense that Jippy still wished to speak and was still struggling to voice words.

Nearly half a mile from Lulu's loft-palace, they finally found Lindsay's little car, parked outside a ruinous, boarded-up church, with one of its wheels – Lindsay was impetuous at parking – on the pavement. From the deserted streets, from nowhere, the taxi Markov had been demanding of the air some seconds earlier, now appeared. No-one was too surprised by this phenomenon; such things tended to happen when Jippy was around.

'Greece, tomorrow.' Markov kissed Lindsay. 'Blue skies, sun, pagan temples, *divine* hotels. Enjoy Oxford. Enjoy New York. See you when we get back, my dearest. We leave at dawn!'

He then began to argue with the taxi driver – he always argued with taxi drivers on principle – about the route he should take to Markov's London apartment, which, like the other bolt-holes Markov maintained around the world, was enviably situated, utterly practical, and very small.

'Goodbye, Jippy,' Lindsay said, kissing him. 'I hope you have a wonderful holiday. Send me a card . . .'

'I w-w-will. I . . .'

There came a lengthy, choking pause. Knowing that Jippy was finally about to volunteer the statement she had sensed was imminent when they were in the garden, Lindsay waited quietly while he fought consonants.

'Y-y-y-yaw . . .'

Jippy stuck painfully; his brown eyes beseeched her. Lindsay did not prompt, for she knew that could make him seize up completely; she shivered as the wind gusted.

'Y-y-y-York . . .'

he managed finally. Lindsay stared at him. Drops of sweat now beaded his forehead; his face was pale. Gently, she took his hand.

'York? Do you mean Yorkshire, Jippy? I was thinking

of Yorkshire, earlier. When we were in that garden. Did you know?"

Jippy nodded, then shook his head. He gripped her hand tightly; his own felt deathly cold.

'Ch-ch . . .' This word, also, would not be said. Lindsay glanced over her shoulder at the desolate, semi-ruined building, with its forlorn boarded eyes. Church? Was Jippy trying to say church?

'Are you all right, Jippy?' she began. 'You look . . .' She hesitated; 'afraid' was the word that sprang to mind, but she was reluctant to use it. She could sense some alarm, some skin-chilling anxiety; it was being communicated to her from Jippy's cold hand. His lips were now trembling with the effort of words; his eyes rested on hers with a dog-like fidelity; she could not tell for sure, she realized, whether his expression was happy or sad. He gave a small convulsive jerk of the head and suddenly the word, the phrase, burst through its restrictions.

'Ch-check your machine.'

Lindsay looked at him blankly. She had been expecting a less mundane statement; according to Markov, Jippy's words often carried a secondary, hidden meaning, but this suggestion seemed to defy all but the most obvious of interpretations.

'My machine, Jippy? You mean my answering machine? When? Tonight? But I always check it anyway . . .'

Jippy's burst of eloquence was over. This time, he did not shake his head or nod; he bestowed on her instead one of his heartening, benevolent smiles – a smile Lindsay would remember, many months later, when she came to consider the results of this evening, and of Jippy's advice. He pressed her hand, then climbed into the cab beside Markov. As it drove away, both men waved. Curiouser and curiouser, Lindsay thought, driving home.

Mindful of Jippy's words, and still haunted by his expression, she checked her fax and her answering machine immediately she entered her apartment. Her hopes, which had risen high on the drive back here, now fell. No faxes; no messages; the machine's unwinking red light mocked her. During her absence, no-one had called her – from Yorkshire, or indeed from elsewhere.

'You have a point there.'

'Rowland, I'm having communication difficulties; severe ones. That bloody man's unavailable; he's not taking calls. And my fax machine won't *feed*; it's making these puking noises, Rowland, every time I redial . . .'

'Tough,' said Rowland, and closed the door.

Ignoring the primal, plaintive cries this action provoked, Rowland crossed the cottage's small untended garden, opened its reluctant gate, breathed in the freshness of the air and began to walk up the steep track beyond.

Somewhere below him, hidden by the curvature of the hills, lay the cluster of church and farms which comprised the only settlement resembling a village for many miles. From that hamlet, as he walked, came the sound of a church bell tolling midnight. An infinitesimal pause on each stroke, before the clapper struck bronze; the turning of a day, the turning of a month; not a night of ill-omen, Rowland thought, increasing his pace, but, rightly, a night when the dead were remembered or placated, and prayers were said for the salvation of their souls.

It was not the dead, but the living who were on his mind as he walked. As soon as he was alone, he felt the touch of a hand, heard the whisper of a voice; since the hand and the voice belonged to a woman now the wife of another man, and mother to that man's child, he tried at once to push her away and drown all remembrance of her. He had tactics for this process; sooner or later, they usually succeeded. It was harder here, in this isolated place, than it was in London, where he could be distracted by the hurly-burly of work, but even so the exorcism could be achieved.

Facts, and the contemplation of facts, helped; it was also useful to have problems that needed solving. Lacking now the enjoyable immediate difficulties he could rely on in London – investigations, deadlines,

although that care was often well disguised. Certain critics, and they tended to be ageing and male, missed the shape and purpose of Court's movies, unable to see beyond their genre disguise. Younger critics, and Rowland agreed with them, could see the use Court made of cinematic conventions. To Rowland, Court's movies had an inexorable logic; frame by frame, they bore the stamp of his vision; they were conceived, shot and edited by a cunning and well-disciplined directorial hand.

The movies then, Rowland thought, were his best clue to Court's character; beyond them, the facts were few. Court rarely gave interviews, and any biographical evidence was minimal. He was of Czech descent, and as far as Rowland could remember, had grown up poor in the Midwest, at some point Anglicizing his original family name. He was now in his forties, and had come to movies unusually late for an American new-wave director. He was not some Hollywood wunderkind, but had studied movies as a mature student, after several years in the military, in – as far as Rowland could recall – the Marines. His early work as a director attracted an art-house following; it was only after his marriage to the already famous Natasha Lawrence that his career took off. With their third film together, *Dead Heat*, the Court cult truly began. Now Tomas Court was divorced, some parties claiming the divorce was bitter, others amicable; whatever the truth, Court and his former wife continued to work together, and were about to do so again, as Colin confirmed. According to Colin, Tomas Court had loved and lost – in which case, Rowland thought dourly, Court's circumstances mirrored his own.

Still intent on releasing memory's grip, the last clinging grasp of its small, cold-fingered hand, Rowland turned his mind from such considerations. The track forked here, and he decided to head off to his left, making for the shadowy outcrop of rocks high above

him. He began to consider his richest source of information, his friend Colin. Colin was scarcely the most reliable of witnesses, but he was an entertaining one. With a sense of growing relief and amusement, walking on, Rowland considered Tomas Court the professional, who had erupted into Colin Lascelles's life, via a 2 a.m. telephone call from America some eight months before.

At that time, Tomas Court had been riding high on the critical and commercial success of *Dead Heat* (Genre: thriller. Setting: an unidentified American city). There was advance-word praise for his then soon-to-be-released movie, *Willow Song* (Genre: *film noir*. Setting: a Paris populated by American émigrés; according to Lindsay's son, Tom, subsequently: 'A cross between Tarantino and Henry James').

In that telephone call, Court had informed Colin that he was now planning to make his first movie in England, and that it was to be an adaptation of a nineteenth-century novel. It would star, as most of Court's movies did, his erstwhile wife, Natasha Lawrence; it would be produced and scripted, as were all his movies, by Court himself. Colin had been surprised by this information, since the subject matter represented a departure from Court's previous movies. Later, on reflection, he was less surprised. Court's work had always been eclectic, and he liked to experiment with different genres; if a director such as Scorsese could move from mafiosi to Edith Wharton's *The Age of Innocence*, why shouldn't Court decide to take a similar course?

Colin, who had been fast asleep when the call came through, and who discovered he had a blinding hangover when awakened, realized, at some point in the conversation – it dawned on him slowly – that Court was virtually offering him the job of this movie's location manager. At which point, fumbling for light switch and cigarettes in the dark, he requested further details. When? He was told. Studio, backers? He was told that

too. Financing, budget? A stream of precise and impressive figures flowed down the phone. By that time, Colin had the light on; he was holding a pad and pencil in his right hand and juggling two lighted cigarettes in his left. Elation was taking hold. He had just agreed to meet Court in Prague, two days later, and Court was about to hang up, when it occurred to Colin, through qualms of residual intoxication and mounting excitement, that there were other rather more vital questions he should have asked.

He duly asked them. In particular, he asked which nineteenth-century novel Court meant to film. To his surprise, Court then became evasive. The name of the novel was not given over the telephone, nor was it given at the subsequent first meeting in Prague; a meeting which took place in a huge, shuttered, dimly lit hotel suite, and which lasted precisely one hour. During that hour, the tall, quietly spoken Court asked questions, and Colin, who was nervous, talked a great deal. He was not allowed to smoke – Court claimed to suffer from asthma, and indeed several asthma inhalers were in prominent view. By the time he left, Colin felt he had overcome this disadvantage, that he had talked good sense and acquitted himself reasonably well.

It was only later, as he went over and over the interview in his mind, that he realized how inconclusive, how puzzling, it had been. Recollecting it, it became disorderly; a dusty imprecision now clouded his view. He realized he could not recall exactly what Tomas Court had said, and that he had spoken very little. He realized that, having expected to acquire information, he had acquired virtually none – meanwhile he himself had given too much away.

'I *talked*,' he had told Rowland, over a drink a few days later. 'I damn well never drew breath, God knows why. Something came over me. He just sat there; he wasn't even asking questions by then, and I suddenly

felt this *compulsion*. It was like the confessional. Worse. I just gabbled away . . .

'What about?'

'I don't *know*.' He sank his head in his hands. 'My father, my brother's funeral, my American great-aunt – you remember, Rowland, Great-Aunt Emily; you met her a few times.'

'What else?'

'Worse – it gets *worse*, Rowland . . .'

'Not the Qantas flight?' Rowland sighed. 'Tell me you didn't do that, Colin . . .'

'I did, I *did*. The woman on the plane – I told him the whole story. *Twice*. I want to die . . .'

'Never mind . . .' Rowland tried to sound encouraging. 'Things must have improved. What about work? Did you tell him—'

'Work?' Colin gave a bitter, mirthless cry. 'I never *mentioned* work. I meant to, obviously. I was going to tell him my Visconti anecdote. I thought that might go down well. But I didn't. I just sicked up all this *stuff*. Feelings – I talked about feelings. I could die of embarrassment. He'll never use me now. I told him things I didn't even *know* until that exact moment. I wasn't even looking at him; I was too intimidated. I was just staring at those blasted asthma inhalers and spilling out my soul.'

Colin's Sophoclean gloom proved unfounded, and his predictions were not fulfilled. Court subsequently offered him the job of this movie's location manager, but several more weeks, another meeting and innumerable telephone calls later, he still had not seen a script, even a draft script, even an outline, and he still did not know the name of the nineteenth-century novel Court intended to film.

Others, he discovered, on making delicate enquiries, were similarly in the dark. Court, it seemed, was hard to pin down, but had been flitting in and out of London

over the past months and *seeing* people. He had approached the doyenne of British casting directors; he might have secured the services of a legendary, autocratic and inspirational designer; he had had talks with technicians and SFX specialists; agents had been lunched; certain actors had been wooed – even the name of Nic Hicks had been mentioned – and now gusts of rumour, counter-rumour, expectation and surmise had begun to waft around London's fashionable watering holes. A tremendous, inchoate energy had been released, but just as, on each of these flitting visits, it swirled up into a dust-storm of excitement and activity, Tomas Court would depart.

He would depart to a film festival in Berlin, or to Los Angeles for post-production work, then sneak previews of *Willow Song*. He would swoop off to Reykjavik for two days, or Oslo for three, or Athens for an hour and a half. Alternatively – and as Rowland understood it, this was the present situation – he would be holed up in the ranch he had recently bought in northern Montana, situated near the Glacier National Park, and consisting of 10,000 acres of rock, river and trees – this according to Colin, who had never been there.

These absences, as far as Rowland could understand, made little difference since, wherever he was, whether in a limousine, or mid-air, or holed up in his wilderness stronghold, Tomas Court *communicated*. From him, or from one of his numerous aides, assistants and side-kicks, issued a daily, sometimes an hourly, flow of letters, faxes and calls. The tenor of these, Rowland gathered, was terse. In person and on paper, Tomas Court seemed a man of few words. Of the few words employed, his favourite was 'No'.

Extracting information from him, Colin had rapidly discovered, was as difficult as finding a vein to extract blood from in a sinewy arm; when the vein *was* located, the blood refused to flow. Nor was he alone in this

Tomas Court, as Colin had noticed by then, had remarkable eyes. He now turned those eyes upon Colin and bestowed upon him one of his long, silent, disconcerting stares.

Court's eyes, narrow, somewhat cat-like, and not without beauty, were of a pale, watery, greenish-hazel hue. Colin found it impossible to read their expression, and could never say why he found their inspection such an unpleasant experience. Court always appeared well mannered, patient and calm; nothing in his gaze suggested disapproval or distrust or dislike, yet Colin at once felt deeply uneasy, as if Court possessed some alien vision, X-ray eyes, Martian eyes, which enabled him to see through Colin's body to inspect the back of his skull. Lies, evasions, boasts and untruths, Colin feared, lay naked before the gaze of this quietly spoken man. He squirmed in his chair (they were meeting in New York, this time, in yet another dimly lit, anonymous hotel).

Colin's question he felt, was like most of his questions, not going to be answered. Rebelling, and summoning some residue of spirit, he repeated it. Court sighed and looked away.

'The heroine interested me, I guess,' he replied. 'She's the tenant of the title, you see.'

Colin did *not* see. He assumed illumination would come when – as he later put it to Rowland – he actually read the blasted novel. Tomas Court now provided him with a copy of it, and of his draft script; with alacrity Colin read both. Having done so, he was none the wiser. He liked the script, which seemed to him to depart from the original novel quite rapidly, but he found the novel itself very heavy going indeed.

'I ploughed through,' he reported to Rowland. 'I ploughed through *religiously* . . .'

'And?'

'It's all very well for you to smile, you already know

it. You never damn well stop reading; it's a disease with you. You like things like that – God knows why.'

'You didn't enjoy it then?'

'Enjoy it? I was *crucified* with boredom. The beginning's OK. This mystery woman arrives; she's called Helen. I quite like that bit, but after that it's downhill all the way.'

From this robust, if possibly simplistic view, Colin could not be dissuaded. Rowland wasted no time on arguments; Colin, armed with Court's script and abandoning all thoughts of the novel, began work. He was very experienced and very good at his work, and initially the location searching went well. Several months passed, during which Rowland occasionally received progress reports. These, at first, were very upbeat indeed, then a detectable note of doubt began to creep in.

Initially, Tomas Court was a marvel, and Colin worshipped at his shrine. He lauded his attention to detail, his perfectionism, the constant fertile flood of his ideas. Then, it seemed, Court could be inspired, certainly, but was also somewhat *changeable*. A week later, the word 'indecision' was used; a week after that the charge had hardened – 'wilful perversity' was now the term. Spoken of as 'Tomas', and with considerable warmth, when this saga began, this modulated to a curt 'Court' some weeks later; there was then a period when he was known, in a jocular, defensive tone as 'the evil genius'; for the past month he had been simply 'that bloody man'. These were the staging posts whereby Colin's initial enthusiasm and admiration dwindled to uncertainty, then irritation, then irascibility, then resentment, and finally – this was his present state – despair.

This journey of Colin's towards the crisis he had now reached had been watched by Rowland from the sidelines. It had amused him at the time, and it amused him now, but beneath the amusement he felt a certain

unease. He paused, having finally reached the vantage-point on the hills to which he had been walking. He looked back the way he had come, bracing himself against the wind, which at this height was strong. It gusted, then insinuated, this wind, buffeting him, then channelling itself through the crevices in the outcrop of rocks against which he leaned. In doing so, it acquired a voice, a thin note of eerie lamentation, which seemed to emanate from the rock, or from the air itself. It chilled Rowland and threatened the equanimity he had been working hard to achieve. Realizing that he had remained out far longer than he had intended, and walked further, he moved away from the plaintive rocks, turned back towards the cottage and began to descend.

The wind hit him hard between the shoulder-blades; it sang out its ghostly protest as it whistled between stones and tugged at the heather. This was a bleak place. Rowland paused, fighting the past, then turned up the collar of his jacket and continued on. He would have liked to return with some useful advice for Colin, but could think of none. He could tell him, of course, to stop worrying over whether or not Tomas Court was now playing games with him; he could tell him to soldier on. Colin would do that in any case, though, for he was tenacious. His present fear, of course, which he could not bring himself to name, was *failure*; Colin, deeply insecure, always feared failure, and yet ran to greet it, to anticipate it; there were reasons for this, as Rowland, his friend for many years, was well aware.

All of these events, Rowland realized, told him more about Colin's character than Tomas Court's. Colin had always been precipitate, rushing in where angels feared to tread, and Rowland, who usually fought his own impulsiveness more successfully, had always liked, even admired him for this. Colin was also passionate, a man of extremes, as Rowland knew he too could be, on occasion; but Colin was less measured and lived in a

had hated them, and had reiterated his hatred, his dissatisfaction and disappointment in a stream of wounding, cold faxes and calls. Colin, stung, had continued his search – was still continuing his search. He had travelled the length and breadth of England; he had made desperate forays into Scotland, and even more desperate forays into Wales. Returning, he despatched batches of photographs, videos, diagrams, maps and notes around the globe to the peripatetic Tomas Court. Time would pass – Court liked to keep him on tenterhooks, Colin claimed – then back would come word from Montana, or Berlin, or Los Angeles. ‘No’ was the word, it was always the word, and so often and so unkindly had that word ‘No’ been said that it had precipitated in Colin a profound confidence crisis. ‘It’s not just my reputation that’s at stake here,’ he had said some three weeks previously, in London, having inveigled Rowland into joining him for dinner after work, ‘it’s my *sanity*. I want you to understand – that bloody man is sucking the marrow out of my bones, Rowland. I’m desperate. I’m at my wit’s end. I don’t know where to turn, so I’m turning to you. Help me out here, Rowland. Just *advise* me, that’s all I ask.’

Rowland had resisted this plea. Once or twice in the past he had been sucked into Colin’s dramas via the advice route, and it was not an experience he had enjoyed.

‘Listen . . .’ Colin went on, ‘you know the blasted novel. There’s a description of Wildfell Hall in chapter two – you remember? Now, you’re interested in architecture. In fact, you know quite an impressive amount. Not as much as I do, obviously, but enough. You spend half your life climbing or walking in godforsaken places . . .’

‘That isn’t true. I wish it were.’

‘. . . So you have the right background knowledge. You must have some ideas. Think, Rowland. I need

aware he could be manipulative. His friend had always lacked confidence in his own abilities; a legacy from his childhood, Rowland suspected, for he had grown up in the shadow of his elder brother, killed in a car accident when Colin was in his last year at school. On the other hand, Colin thrived on crises, and if none existed, was capable of creating some of his own. On balance, Rowland thought then, he believed Colin was truly in need of some help and moral support; there was now genuine panic and bewilderment in his manner, and it alarmed Rowland, since it reminded him of Colin as he had been when he first encountered him, in Oxford, some eighteen years before.

That meeting had taken place late at night, in the quad at Balliol College, where they were both undergraduates, although they had then moved in very different social spheres. Colin, who could be heard yodelling before he was seen, was wearing white tie and tails, and was accompanied, or propped up, by a clutch of cronies from some ancient, snobbish, august Oxford club whose members devoted themselves to getting drunk fast. Colin had just won a competition that involved drinking straight down as many bottles of vintage claret as was feasible in five minutes. He was already celebrated throughout Oxford for his feats in this respect, which had won him the nickname Deep Throat. On that occasion, he had consumed two and a half bottles of Chateau Margaux 1959, and was, astonishingly, still vertical. Rowland had not come from the kind of school, or the kind of background, essential for membership of such clubs; upper-class louts were not his favourite companions, and – given to puritanism then – he had looked at this rowdy group of Old Etonians with distaste.

He had been about to pass by when something in Deep Throat's expression caught his eye. He was regarding Rowland with a flushed, kindly innocence,

this red-haired young man, who was the heir to 12,000 acres, who had just consumed wine which cost more than Rowland could afford to spend in ten weeks. His expression conveyed precarious dignity, absurd pride and incipient distress. He made a hiccuping sound and fixed Rowland with blue, alarmed eyes. 'Help,' he said, with surprising distinctness, as he began slowly, like a felled tree, to topple forwards towards the flagstones of the quad. Rowland, in a better state of alertness than the friends were, found he had moved forward, held out his arms and caught him. They then scattered, and Deep Throat was sick – ignominiously, understandably and *accurately*, as he remarked the next morning when Rowland called in to check on him.

'I missed my shoes!' he said, bright-faced. 'I missed yours as well. Here, have some champagne. Childe Roland to the dark quad came. I'm going on the wagon tomorrow, so shall we celebrate now?'

They celebrated, at nine in the morning, with a bottle of Dom Perignon, some iced buns provided by Colin's scout, and anchovy toast burned by Colin. Rowland missed two lectures and made two discoveries: he was less of a puritan than he had thought, and he liked Colin Lascelles, who, it seemed, was even more appalled at the prospect of inheriting 12,000 acres and the minor title that went with them than Rowland McGuire was.

The next week, hung-over again, he drove Rowland out into the countryside north of Oxford and stopped the car on the edge of a beech wood. He pointed; below them, in a valley enfolded by gentle Cotswold hills, was one of the most beautiful houses Rowland had ever seen.

'That's Shute,' Colin said. 'It will be mine one day. It should have been my brother's, only he died.' Then he let in the clutch, drove them back to Oxford and started drinking again.

From that moment onwards, Colin attached himself

to Rowland, and Rowland, often exasperated by him, grew fond of him. In the eighteen years since, their relationship was little changed. Although Colin had learned to control his drinking, indulging in binges only occasionally, and was now highly successful, he remained incorrigible, and he still treated Rowland as a surrogate brother. He still asked Rowland's assistance from time to time, and when pressured, Rowland grumbled, then, often against his better judgement, gave way.

So, on the occasion of that dinner, he had agreed to help. He promised to mull the matter over, consult some friends and see what he could come up with. He suggested Colin meet him in his editorial office at the *Sunday Correspondent* the next day; there, Rowland would join him as soon as he could escape from a round of meetings.

He found Colin ensconced in his office, propositioning his secretary. Having extricated her from a situation she appeared to be enjoying – Colin was good-looking and had undeniable charm – Rowland gave him a brief and, he hoped, helpful lecture on Anne Brontë's Wildfell Hall.

'Think about this house, Colin,' he said. 'Think about the mystery woman you like so much at the beginning of the book. She's taken refuge in Wildfell Hall, hasn't she?'

'Ye-es,' said Colin, eyes beginning to glaze.

'It's not her permanent home. She doesn't *own* it; she's renting it, from a man.'

'I don't really see', Colin began mutinously, 'that it makes the least bit of difference *who* she's renting it from. It could just as well be some mad old grandmother – so what?'

'No, Colin. *Think*. This woman is young, she's beautiful, she has a son – and she's lied about her past. She's living under a false name and she's in *hiding* at Wildfell

Hall. What happens almost immediately after she's moved in there?'

'Oh, I don't know. All these bitchy women in the neighbourhood start gossiping about her. Gilbert Markham meets her and falls in love with her. Then – I'm not too sure about the next bit, I skipped it, I kept falling asleep; it's much better in the movie – hang on, I know! They all find out she's having a secret affair with the owner of Wildfell Hall, who's this tall, dark, brooding man. Then we get this flashback bit, and it goes on and on and on . . .'

'Dear God.' Rowland buried his head in his hands. 'How you got a degree, Colin, I'll never understand. Think. Use your *brain*. Forget all this gobbledegook; you're getting the plot wrong. Think about property, and sex, Colin, and the connections between the two . . .'

At the mention of sex, Colin's face brightened. 'I don't quite follow you, Rowland . . .'

'Listen, Colin, it may have escaped your notice, but for much of the novel, all the *property* is owned by men. The question Anne Brontë raises – one of the questions – is whether the men own the women as well.'

'Oh Lord – it's *feminist*, you mean?' Colin blinked. 'I must have missed that. No wonder I didn't like it, I can't stand that sort of thing. It's so *unnecessary*, don't you find? Look, Rowland, this is all very interesting, but could we get on? I have to find a *house* . . .'

'I know that, but this house symbolizes something, Colin.'

'Not to me it doesn't. A house is a house. It has four walls, a roof and a door. Come on, Rowland, you said you'd give me some suggestions . . .'

Rowland gave up. He passed Colin a list. Of the four houses on it, it turned out, three had already been suggested by Colin and rejected by Tomas Court, a fact he had neglected to mention. This did not appear to demoralize Colin; on the contrary, he assumed a

businesslike demeanour, produced numerous dog-eared maps and notebooks, and showed signs of cheering up.

'I knew I could rely on you!' He beamed at Rowland. 'We think alike. We're getting somewhere now.'

Pointedly, Rowland looked at his watch.

'There's just one leetle problem, Rowland. This fourth place you suggest . . . it's, well, it's a bit too remote. It's a hundred miles from all my other locations, there's no road to it, and not a whiffle of an hotel . . .'

Rowland controlled his temper. 'You didn't mention roads or hotels.'

'Well, I thought you'd *realize*. I mean, think, Rowland, I have to house a crew, the cast, Natasha Lawrence. I have to consider costs: transport, caravans, limousines, generators, computer links, catering, security. Stars don't *walk* to location, Rowland, and they're kind of fussy about hotels. I can't put Natasha Lawrence up in some boarding house, now can I?'

'Why not? She's there to work. I imagine she'd survive.'

'Don't be naïve, Rowland. You know perfectly well doesn't work like that. We're talking suites, twenty-four-hour room service, a pool, a gym. She has a bodyguard, and she works out with him every morning . . .'

'You said *remote*, dammit . . .'

'I know, but there's remote and remote. Now don't get testy, Rowland, and don't give up on me . . .'

'Give up on you? I wouldn't dream of it. After all, apart from the small matter of getting out a Sunday newspaper, I have nothing else to do. My calls are being *held*. I'll just tell them to hold them for the next hour, shall I? Or would two suit you better?'

'Now, Rowland, don't be sarcastic. I can't take it, not just now.'

'Besides, it's perfectly straightforward, right? We should sort this out in no time. What you need is a Grade

One Jacobean house no-one's noticed or altered in four hundred years, in a remote moorland location, with satellite links and a luxury hotel at the end of its drive. What could be easier? If this newspaper doesn't come out next Sunday and I do nothing else but sit here being your psychotherapist, while you pop out and seduce my secretary once in a while . . .'

'She's a very pretty secretary, Rowland. An excellent choice.'

'... then no doubt we'll find you your house. You'll be delighted. Tomas Court will be delighted. Meanwhile, I—'

'Please, Rowland,' Colin said, in a very small, pathetic voice. 'Please. I'm begging you now. I've helped you in the past. You remember that time at Oxford when I lent you my lecture notes?'

'No, I don't.'

'What about all those Oxford girls? I was useful to you then, Rowland. When you broke their hearts, who consoled them? I did. Max occasionally, I admit, but I was the chief consoler, Rowland, remember that.'

'You're confusing consolation and opportunism, I think.'

Colin waved this objection aside. 'Rowland, let us not argue about ancient history . . .'

'Argue about it? You can't even *remember* it. You were drunk, Colin. Perpetually drunk. You were drunk for three whole years . . .'

'You're right. You're right.' Colin sank his head in his hands. 'I was an irresponsible wastrel. A ne'er-do-well. The Lascelles black sheep. But you set me on the straight and narrow, Rowland. You got me through my exams. I'll never forget that. None of my family ever forgets it . . .'

Rowland tensed.

'So I know I have no right to ask for your help again,

but you did mention you were going on holiday next week . . .'

'What's that got to do with it?'

'Nothing. There's no need to look so suspicious. I just thought, since you'll be going north anyway . . .'

'Colin, I'm going climbing. It's the first holiday I've taken in over a year.'

'Of course. And you need that break, Rowland, you deserve it. You're looking tired, tense. Which is why I thought you might like to spend a few days in Yorkshire on your way back from Scotland. I'm renting a cottage up there as my base. It's on your route back, Rowland, and that bloody man will still be bombarding me with faxes and calls. By then, I'll be on my eighteenth perfect house, I expect, and ready to shoot myself. So it just occurred to me, maybe, out of the goodness of your heart, and because you once loved my sister, Rowland, years ago . . .'

'I did not love your sister.'

'Well, she loved you, which is much the same thing, and despite your failure to respond, she still speaks fondly of you. She's recovered, of course, she has four children now. Even so, every time your name comes up, I catch this little gleam in her eye . . .'

'Colin, what do I have to do to make you go away?'

'She always says what a very good loyal *friend* you are, Rowland. Well, they all say that: my father, Great-Aunt Emily; they never stop singing your praises – what a good influence you are on me. A man of honour. One to rely on in moments of extremity . . .'

Rowland sighed. 'Dear God. What have I done to deserve this? All right. OK, you win. Give me the damn address and I'll look in on my way back . . .'

Colin had taken this capitulation generously. Having got his way, at which he was skilled, he skedaddled. And now, here Rowland was, in a cold leaky cottage in the back of beyond, in the company of a man who, like

himself, could not cook. For three days, subsisting on lumpen cheese sandwiches and cans of soup, he had endured Colin's complaints and joined him on fruitless searches for a place that Rowland, too, was beginning to believe did not exist.

It was a chimera, he told himself, opening that reluctant creaking gate and approaching the cottage. When he had first been drawn into this ridiculous quest, he had seen Wildfell Hall clear in his mind; now it had receded. The more he listened to Colin, the less he saw.

It was diverting, this search, up to a point. It had the advantage of distracting him, but he now intended to return to London and work, and the real world. He would leave in the morning; he would be back in his own house by Saturday afternoon. He might telephone Lindsay perhaps . . . It was Saturday morning now, he realized, looking at his watch. He would grab a few hours sleep and leave immediately after an early breakfast . . . And he entered the cottage intending to firmly inform Colin of this.

'Well, well, well, well, well,' Colin said.

Rowland stopped in the doorway. It was at once apparent to him that Colin, noisily suicidal when he left, was now drunk. It was one-thirty in the morning; during an absence of one and a half hours, Colin had contrived to become merry. His long thin limbs were stretched out on the sofa; his auburn hair was dishevelled; he had his feet to the fire, a large tumbler of Scotch in his hand and a Cheshire Cat grin on his face.

'Aha!' he said indistinctly. 'Good news! *Doubly good news!* What a dark horse you are, Rowland. *What a real nice world this is.*'

Rowland took this announcement with equanimity. He removed his wet boots and poured himself a Scotch from a near-empty bottle. He sat down in a squashed comfortable armchair on the other side of the fire. Colin watched him beatifically as he did this.

'Well now, let me guess,' Rowland said eventually, when Colin seemed about to achieve nirvana or fall asleep. 'You've had a call from Tomas Court? A fax? He actually likes one of the houses?'

'He does. The first one we saw; the one you suggested; the one near the sea. He's just got the v-v. ...'

'Videos?'

'Them. Those. And the punctures. He's looked at the punctures . . .'

'The pictures?'

'Right. And he likes them. He likes them a lot. He likes them a very great deal. He likes them an *inordinary* amount.'

'Well, now that is good news. Your problems are over. Great.'

'You're a true friend, Rowland; that's what you are. A friend in need, indeed.' Colin paused and showed signs of becoming emotional.

'Think nothing of it,' Rowland said. 'I shouldn't cry about it, if I were you, Colin. Are you sure you really want that whisky?'

It seemed Colin did want the whisky. It seemed that he might resent being deprived of the whisky. It seemed he was prepared to put up a fight about the whisky. In fact, he would fight any man who came between him and the whisky; fight him to the death. Rowland agreed that this was a very reasonable point of view.

Colin, who had risen uncertainly during this recital of his rights, sat down again uncertainly. He looked at Rowland for some while and, at length, appearing to recognize him, reiterated his opinion that Rowland was a dark horse, a very dark horse indeed. He tapped his nose as he said this.

Rowland found this statement, and the reasons for it, rather harder to unravel. After ten minutes of obfuscation, he had the gist. Some while after the good news from Court, which Colin had immediately begun

celebrating, a woman had called, wishing to speak to Rowland. This woman, whose name was Lynne, or Linda, or possibly Lynette, had a voice and a manner Colin instantly liked. Or, another way of putting it, he and Lynne, or Lisa, had hit it off. They had, it seemed, chatted away as if they were old friends; they had chatted away for *hours*, about Yorkshire, and men who liked walking in the dark, and life, and this and that.

'This and that?' Rowland said, when this account rambled to a conclusion. 'And her name's Lindsay, by the way.'

'Lindsay! The fair Lindsay! I salute her!' Colin drank.

'She's dark, not fair,' Rowland said, his manner slightly irritable.

'Dark *and* fair. With a voice. With a *magical* voice. It has a catch in it.' Colin seemed to be sobering up rapidly. 'I could have listened to that voice all night. She liked my voice too; she said so. She said I sounded very *merry*. I cheered her up.'

'I'm delighted to hear it.' Rowland rose. 'Did she leave a message for me or was she too busy complimenting you?'

'Can't remember.'

'Try. She must have had a reason for calling.'

'She sent her love.'

'Not that. A proper reason. What did she want?'

Colin was relapsing again; the angelic smile had reappeared on his face. 'We came to an understanding,' he announced.

'I doubt that.'

'We did. We *communicated*. Arrangements were made! I remember! I remember!' Colin flailed, then subsided. 'It was a friendly call, she said. She wondered when you might be getting back. You're *friendly*. Friendly friends. That's what she said. An that . . .'

'After that, what?'

'I proposed. I proposed marriage.'

'I see.' Rowland gave Colin a long, cool, green-eyed look. 'And did my friend accept?'

'I think she did.'

'Well, accept my congratulations,' Rowland said evenly. 'And now I'm going to bed.'

V

At ten in the morning, that same Saturday, Lindsay's son Tom was calm. He was in the large bedsitting room of his lodgings in a tall, dilapidated but pleasant north Oxford house; from upstairs and from below, where other undergraduates had rooms, came the sounds of music: Mozart from the north side, Dire Straits from the south. He was stretched full-length on a sofa with an unfortunate cerise loose cover, a sofa that even his landlady, the *distrain* widow of a physics professor, admitted had seen better days. As much of the cerise as possible was disguised by an Indian cotton throw found by Tom's girlfriend, Katya. Tom had managed to position himself so that he avoided the jab and prod of springs.

On his chest was balanced the third bowl of cornflakes he had eaten that morning, this one moistened with water, as he and Katya had forgotten to buy milk the previous day. He munched a spoonful experimentally; they tasted edible. He turned a page of the large book propped on his knees, which detailed the economic consequences upon Germany of the Treaty of Versailles.

Across the room from him, Katya, who ostensibly lived in her college, but spent little time there, was pecking away at the keys of her word processor with two fingers. She was wearing a white nightdress and woolly socks; her auburn hair was wound up in a bundle on top of her head, from which precarious knot tendrils escaped. Every so often, she would stop pecking at the keys, push these tendrils aside impatiently, lean forward,

adjust her large working spectacles and glare at the screen. Her essay on George Eliot's *Middlemarch* was due to be delivered to her tutor, the terrifying Dr Stark. It should have been completed the evening before, and would have been, had she and Tom not decided that a late-night six-hour Hallowe'en retrospective of classic vampire movies was rather more urgent than a nineteenth-century novel, or inexorable inflation in 1930s Germany. Then they had had to eat, then Cressida-from-upstairs had arrived with some red wine and Algerian grass; then they had had to sleep – well, go to bed anyway; then . . . Tom considered the subsequent events with pleasure. Two hours of actual sleep? One and a half? He abandoned the cornflakes and half-closed his eyes; the tome on his knees slid to the floor. Ten, ten, ten. Oxford had so many churches, and none of their clocks synchronized. The chiming of an hour could last five minutes or more, and Tom, loving the city, loved it especially for this stretching of time.

Peck, peck, peck went Katya's fingers on the keys. Katya, expected to get a first, as was Tom, was fierce in her typing, fierce in her opinions, this being one of the reasons why Tom had now loved her for two years. No, more than two years, he thought, lazily, stretching out his legs and wriggling his toes. Two years, two months, a week and two days. The length of this period of fierce fidelity pleased Tom; it reassured him that he had not inherited his father's genes; his father, whom he scarcely knew and now never saw, being, as Tom sometimes contemptuously said, a fickle weakling of a man. Two years, two months, a week, two days and – he paused to calculate – twelve and a half hours.

It was at this point, very suddenly, that Tom ceased to be calm. He leaped to his feet as if electrocuted, and stared wildly around the room. The room, he now saw, was a slum, a pigsty. How had this escaped his notice before? The bed in the alcove was unmade; there were

T-shirts, socks and knickers strewn across the floor; on the table was a stack of last night's dirty plates and unwashed wineglasses; there were Rizla papers and obvious roaches in the ashtray. He sniffed; did the room smell of grass? He thought it might smell of grass. He plunged across the room and opened the window wide.

'Oh my God. Oh my God,' he said. 'It's Saturday. It's Saturday now.'

'So?' Katya did not look up; she pecked even faster at the keys.

'Mum's coming. She'll be here any minute. She'll be here in less than half an hour.'

Katya glanced at her watch. 'She'll be late; she's always late. She'll get lost in the one-way systems. You know how she drives . . .'

'Shit, shit, double shit.' Tom was leaping crazily about, stuffing socks and knickers under pillows. 'What if she isn't late? What if she's on time?'

'Stay calm. I need those knickers. What are you hopping around for?'

'I just stubbed my toe. I stubbed it on that evil coffee table. I'm crippled, I may never walk again . . .'

'Straighten the duvet. Pass me those knickers. Just give me two minutes, I'm almost finished. I just have to be really savage about Will Ladislav . . .'

'Who?'

'He's the love interest. In here.' Katya indicated a fat paperback copy of *Middlemarch* from which protruded slips of white place marks, like a porcupine's spines. 'Not one of Eliot's successes. An apology for a man.'

Tom moaned. He emptied the tell-tale ashtray, hid the Rizla papers, picked up the dirty plates and glasses and shoved them into a cupboard. He closed the door, handed Katya her knickers, straightened the duvet, punched the pillows, then stood on one leg like a crane, rubbing his injured foot and looking around him with an expression of wild surmise.

'What else? What else? There's bound to be something else. Mum has X-ray eyes; she doesn't miss *anything*. What about the dust? There's all this *dust*. Where does all this dust come from?'

'Lindsay's seen dust before. She won't mind. I can't think why you're fussing. Lindsay's cool.'

'Cool? She's my *mother*. She'll go on about washing facilities. Cooking facilities.'

'So? Show her the kitchen; it does exist.'

'The kitchen? Are you mad? She'd *die* if she saw that kitchen. There's a bowl of Cressida's spaghetti on the window sill that's three months old. It has *mould*. It practically has legs. It's *breeding* out there . . .'

'I expect she'll understand. I wish you'd shut up. I just have to skewer this love scene. How can you be a genius and write a love scene like this one? It creaks. There's a ridiculous storm. She can't do storms. She's pinched the storm from one of the Brontës. Charlotte, I think. Where's my *Jane Eyre*?'

'Under that coffee mug, next to the ashtray. Christ – quick, give me that ashtray . . .'

In the act of reaching for it, Tom paused. He could now read the words on Katya's computer screen; they were not kind words – Katya was young, as well as fierce – and they caused Tom some alarm.

'Shit, Katya – you've really . . . You don't mince your words. Castrated? Epicene? Poor Will what's-his-name . . .'

He bent more closely and read the next paragraph. Unconcerned, concentrated, Katya continued to peck away.

'Bloody hell.' Tom gave a sigh. 'Is this guy Will supposed to be the hero?'

'Sort of. Maybe. I can't make up my mind. Neither could Eliot, unfortunately, and it shows.'

'You say – this guy Will Whatsit isn't erotic then?'

'He's handsome.' Katya shrugged. 'Passionate. He obeys some of the conventions. But not erotic – no.'

'Do heroes have to be erotic?'

'Sure, heroes ought to exude sex. They have to have sexual power.'

This statement alarmed Tom even more. He forgot about the disorder of the room and the pain of his stubbed toe.

'Sexual power?' he said. 'Come on, Katya – that's a nineteenth-century novel. Closed bedroom doors.'

'No-one screws, you mean?' Katya, still concentrated, typed a final blistering sentence. She leaned back in her chair, removed her spectacles and smiled. '*That* doesn't matter. In fact, it helps. The reader's vile imagination does all the work . . . You want to know what makes a man erotic in a novel?'

'I already know: money and looks. I've read *Pride and Prejudice*. Hell.'

'You're wrong, it's silence: a capacity for silence. Obviously, money helps – or did. Social status. Dark eyes and dark hair . . .'

'Shit, shit, shit,' said Tom, whose hair was fair.

'But silence is vital. If a hero is a man of few words, he remains mysterious, and mystery in a man is *always* erotic . . .'

Tom looked at Katya doubtfully. He did not like this opinion or this conversation. He groaned. Beautiful, dedicated Katya seemed oblivious to his distress; she had picked up a notebook, and was scribbling a couple of *aides-mémoire*.

'Interesting . . .' She scribbled faster. 'The links between eroticism and capitalism. Does the money enhance the virility, or is it the other way around? The silent man as the romantic hero . . . Fascinating. It allows the reader to write the hero's script for him, of course. Maybe *that's* why it works so well . . .' She tossed down her pencil in sudden impatience and fixed Tom with her lovely, and very short-sighted, blue eyes.

'Of course, all that stuff's antediluvian. When I write

a novel, it won't have a hero *or* a heroine. I have no patience with that sort of thing.'

Tom felt humbled. He made a private vow to be as Trappist as possible from then on. Perhaps it had been a mistake to be so open with Katya? Perhaps, in revealing his heart to her, he had disarmed himself and unwisely divested himself of a vital weapon in the male armoury. Enigma. Mystery. Silence. Erotic power.

'Shit,' he said miserably. 'I'm a failure as a man. I see it now. I'm like Will Whatsit. I'm a eunuch, a castrate. I'm epicene.'

That, at last, attracted Katya's attention.

'Are you?' she asked, leaning forward and touching him in a way, and with an immediate result, that gave the lie to this statement. Tom forgot about novels and heroes, and also about the time. Ten pleasurable minutes later, he remembered clocks; he leaped out of bed with a panic-stricken howl.

'Shit. Double shit. Where's the duvet?'

'On the floor. Pass me my jeans.'

'This is terrible. This is appalling. I love you, Katya.'

'I love you too. Comb your hair.'

Tom combed his hair, which was now rather longer than when his mother had last seen it. He felt his chin, decided to shave, decided not to shave; he found a clean shirt and rushed about the room. While he rushed, Katya put things in order. She achieved this, it seemed to Tom, in about fifteen seconds. The dust disappeared; the fluff on the carpet was sucked away; papers lay down in piles; books stacked themselves on shelves. A quick, fierce burst of female efficiency; suddenly chaos no longer threatened and the detritus was gone.

Fifteen seconds after that, Tom was posed on the sofa, surrounded by suitable evidence of undergraduate industry; Katya, also posed with book in hand, was seated opposite, smelling of rose-petal soap, demure in an armchair. For five minutes, all the church bells of

Oxford chimed the half-hour. Both waited expectantly.

'I *told* you she'd be late,' Katya said a short while later. 'I *told* you we had time. We could have . . .'

Tom, intent on an heroic, erotic silence, ignored this prompt. He gave Katya a volcanic look; Katya giggled; Tom persevered. Katya's amusement died away; she shifted in her seat, lowered her eyes and, to Tom's triumph, blushed rosily. Tom was just congratulating himself on the ease with which he had mastered this effective new technique – nothing to it, much easier than actually speaking, a cinch – when the telephone rang. Both Tom and Katya expected it to be Lindsay, calling with some excuse for her delay – she had backed into a bollard, imprisoned herself in a remote cul-de-sac, or something similar. It was not Lindsay, however, but her friend, and Tom's friend, Rowland McGuire. Rowland, it emerged, was trying to track down Lindsay.

They spoke for some while, then Tom replaced the receiver.

'Great,' he said. 'Rowland's going to join us for lunch. He's going to drop in on his way back to London. He's got some friend with him . . .'

'A woman friend?'

'No. Some man who was up at Oxford with him. Works in films.'

'Interesting.' Katya gave Tom a sidelong glance. 'Lindsay will be pleased. You don't think . . .'

'No, I don't,' Tom said, in a very certain tone. 'Katya, I've told you a billion times, they're *friends* . . .'

'He might fancy her. I think it's on the cards, and you'd be the last person to notice if he did.'

'My mother? You must be mad. She's thirty-five. She's been thirty-five for quite a while.'

'She's Rowland's age, or thereabouts.'

'That's different. Get it into your head – my mother is not Rowland's type.'

'Why not? She's pretty; she's nice.' Katya paused; she gave a small frown. 'What is Rowland's type?'

'Damozeles,' Tom replied darkly, 'or so I've heard. Beautiful women. *Difficult* women. Women who need rescuing. Rowland's gallant, or so people say.'

'Do they indeed?' Katya's frown deepened.

'People gossip about Rowland.' Tom shrugged. 'It's probably all lies. They say he breaks hearts. In the nicest possible way, of course.'

'He's arrogant,' Katya said, thoughtfully, after a further pause. 'He's one of the most arrogant men I've ever met, but some women — *older* women — like that kind of thing. Lindsay might like it, for one . . .'

'She doesn't. She never stops ticking him off for being arrogant, jumping to conclusions, that sort of thing. But he's clever—'

'Very.'

'And he's kind, so she forgives him. And she amuses him; she makes him laugh, relax. Rowland trusts her, and Rowland's very reserved; he hardly trusts *anyone* . . .'

'I've noticed that.'

'So, they're friends; that's it, nothing more. Why can't you accept that? As far as Rowland's concerned, my mother's an honorary man . . .'

'An enviable fate.'

'Katya, I've *told* you, Lindsay's given up on men in the romantic sense. She gave up years ago. She's not interested and she doesn't need them. She has a good job, a good salary, lots of friends, her own apartment. She's got shot of my grandmother, which is nothing short of a miracle. I'm not there, messing the place up. She's her own woman. Why would she need a man?'

Katya could think of several answers to that question, not all of them polite. In different circumstances, she would have voiced them, but now, merciful to Tom and condescending to the blindnesses of man and son, she

remained silent. One day, she thought, when the moment was more propitious, she might have to explain to Tom, that he, like most sons and daughters, chose to neuter his mother. She herself avoided this error only because her own mother flaunted her sexuality with an abandon Katya both envied and loathed. This ambivalence Katya also wished to confess to Tom, but the moment had not yet come. She hesitated, then rose and crossed to the only mirror the room possessed – a small one, with a crack in the glass.

Like her mother, Katya was tall; unlike her mother, Katya was not thin. She examined her own reflection censoriously; it suddenly occurred to her that her hair might look better down.

'Maybe I should change,' she began. 'I'm not sure about this sweater . . .'

'Change? Why?'

'Oh, I don't know. For lunch, I suppose. If all these people are coming . . .'

'Don't.' Tom also rose. He kissed the back of her creamy neck. He wound one of the auburn tendrils around his finger. 'Don't, you look lovely just the way you are. You . . .'

He stopped, remembering the Trappist vow; a screeching of brakes was heard, then a few swear-words as Lindsay attempted to park outside.

Tom clattered down the stairs to let his mother in; Katya remained, gazing moodily at her own reflection. Eventually, after many toings and froings, much unloading and dropping of packages, a laden Tom and a laden Lindsay finally arrived in the room, talking nineteen to the dozen as usual, and breathing fast.

Tom had been up at Oxford only a few weeks for this, the first term of his second year; this was Lindsay's first sight of his new lodgings. Being optimistic and loyal by nature, she began admiring things at once. It was a wonderful house in a romantic street; she loved the trees

outside and the leafy view of roofs and dreaming spires. The room was really spacious; you scarcely noticed the pattern on the carpet once you were inside, and as for that cerise sofa, well, it looked very comfortable, and the Indian throw was marvellous, how clever of Katya to find it . . . What, the kitchen was just across the landing, and shared? How convenient; what fun. No, of course she didn't need to see it, but she had brought this huge casserole thing that Tom and Katya might find useful, oh, and some sweaters Tom had left behind – it might turn cold at any moment – and somewhere there was a poster she'd found, in case the walls were bare, and somewhere, somewhere, damn these wretched carrier bags, there was a bottle of that scent Katya had said she liked . . .

Throughout the confusions of this speech, Lindsay, who could never bear to arrive anywhere empty-handed, delved into bags and tossed wrapping paper around. The gifts, apart from the sweaters, were well received. The walls here *were* bare, and Tom was delighted with the spider poster from *Dead Heat*. Katya opened a large flagon of scent called *L'Aurore* and dabbed some behind her ears. Into the autumnal sunlight of the room came a burst of spring, the scent of hyacinths and narcissi.

Katya kissed Lindsay, then reminding herself, as she sometimes did, that she was going to be a novelist and as such should *observe*, she drew back and watched. She liked Lindsay, and now that she knew her better, she was beginning to see that Lindsay was adept at a variety of actressy tricks. Lindsay rarely entered a room, she *erupted* into it, chattering away, beginning on one sentence, and then, before it was completed, beginning on the next. She might look boyish, with her slim build and her crop of short, curly, dark hair; she might be inches shorter than statuesque Katya; and she might, like a small boy, possess a great deal of engaging and

disruptive energy – but to a degree, Katya suspected, she cultivated this. Lindsay's energy, Katya felt, was channelled in a protective way. The chatter, the hand gestures, the insouciance were a form of disguise – they distracted attention, and Lindsay intended them to do so, from what she might actually be thinking or feeling; and Lindsay, in a muddled, loving, well-intentioned way, was afraid of revealing her true feelings above all; or so Katya thought.

Watching her now, Katya suspected that Lindsay missed Tom desperately, and was desperately afraid he might sense that. For this reason, intent on freeing Tom, she put on an act of loving dissimulation: possibly lonely, she stressed how busy she was; perhaps yearning to stay, she emphasized that this visit was a kind of fly-past, and that she would have to rush back to London immediately after lunch.

Katya was touched by this and by Tom's blindness to the deception. Tom loved his mother and was, in many ways, very close to her, yet he was blind in this respect. This interested Katya, the future novelist. She made herself some crisp, pitying mental notes on the insights and sightlessness of love.

Lindsay's acting ability, she noted, came under further strain when Tom announced that Rowland McGuire and some friend of his from Yorkshire would be joining them for lunch. It is difficult, perhaps impossible, to disguise immediate delight – and Lindsay, Katya saw, could not do so. Her eyes lit; faint colour appeared in her cheeks; when she spoke, there was joy in her voice.

'Rowland called? He called here? Which friend? Oh, Colin? Heavens, I spoke to him last night, when I was trying to get Rowland. He was terribly drunk . . .'

At this point, breaking off, Lindsay suddenly remembered that she had brought with her some champagne, to celebrate the new lodgings; it was really for Tom and Katya, but perhaps one bottle might be opened up.

One was opened, which provided Lindsay with more opportunities for distraction and conversational feints. Fiddling with the foil, as Tom and Katya fetched and washed various glasses, Lindsay gave them an animated, but edited, account of her telephone call to Yorkshire, and its results.

She did not mention – she was too reticent, and too ashamed – the minutes she had spent staring at the unwinking red light of her answering machine the previous night. After all, to call Rowland – who had left the number in case of emergencies, he said – was an inexcusable weakness. Shortly before, she had vowed to exorcise his influence, to abandon her hopes . . . Yet working against that solemn resolve was a deep residual unease, the result of her final conversation with Jippy.

Jippy had mentioned 'York', which must surely mean 'Yorkshire'. He had advised her to check her machine, yet there was no message on that machine. Perhaps then, the absence of messages *was* the message . . . at which point, Lindsay's nimble treacherous heart gave a lurch. Something was wrong, that was why Jippy had seemed so alarmed. Could Rowland be ill, or – and here Lindsay's quick-start imagination kicked in – or worse, could there have been some accident? A climbing accident? A car accident? Frayed ropes? Failing brakes? One second Lindsay saw Rowland lying injured somewhere, the next second, he was deep in a gully, pale, dying, with her telephone number on his lips. She hesitated no longer; with a sweet sense of full justification for this recidivism, she had dialled the Yorkshire number at once.

'And I got Colin,' she said, pouring champagne. 'He was celebrating. Apparently, Tomas Court is about to make a film in England, and Colin's the location manager . . .'

'Tomas Court? Wow!' Her son gave a low whistle.

'Court's been giving him a very hard time, but thanks to Rowland, Colin has finally found him some house he needs. We had a long talk. He told me all about Court and that strange ex-wife of his – she was being stalked, he said, for years, and she nearly had a breakdown, and it led to their divorce . . . Colin was *not* discreet. And then . . .' She paused. 'Then, he started flirting with me. Rather well, considering I've never met him.'

Tom sighed and gave his mother a censorious look.

'And very well considering how drunk he was. We were talking for ages. Rowland was out on one of his strange night walks and Colin kept saying he'd be back at any moment – only he wasn't. And then . . .' She glanced at her son with a smile. 'And then, this was the best bit, Colin proposed.'

'*Proposed?*' Tom's face was now very censorious indeed. 'And he's never met you? He must have been pissed.'

'He fell in love with my voice,' Lindsay said, with dignity. 'We'd been talking about obsession – obsession was in the air, like a germ, and I think Colin caught it. We discussed love, at length, then he proposed. I accepted, of course.'

'I don't *believe* this. Mum, listen . . .'

'We've decided on a spring wedding. Then we're going to spend the rest of our lives together, in contentment and decorum, after some initial years of heady romance.' She paused. 'So, you're about to meet your future stepfather, Tom. I hope you're looking forward to that . . .'

'One question. One little question.' Tom groaned as he refilled their glasses. 'Why didn't you hang up?'

'Certainly not,' Lindsay replied with spirit. 'It's time I remarried and Colin is the man for me. He is very charming. I think I've done well for myself.'

'This lunatic', said Tom, in a gruff tone, 'is arriving

here any minute – with Rowland. Now, I'm praying he was so pissed that he's not going to remember any of this . . .'

'In that case, I shall remind him – at once. I don't intend to be jilted, Tom, I can assure you of that.'

Tom sank his head in his hands. His capacity to be embarrassed by his mother was well developed – indeed, he could be embarrassed by her breathing, or so Lindsay said. He gave a deep sigh.

'Mum, you remember the time you turned up at school prize-giving in that micro-skirt?'

'The Donna Karan? Yes.'

'And you remember that cricket match, when I was out l.b.w., and you argued with the umpire?'

'That umpire was blind as a bat.'

' . . . And then you chatted up the headmaster over tea in the pavilion?'

'Of course I remember. He was a widower. That was such a brilliant move.'

' . . . And then he invited you to lunch?'

'A very *useful* lunch. Consider the consequences.'

The consequences had been that, several months later, the headmaster had been snapped up by Lindsay's svelte but difficult mother, Louise. He was now, therefore, married to Tom's grandmother. Fortunately, this appalling event, which Tom could never have lived down, had happened after he left school. Lindsay, unrepentant, regarded this as one of her greatest *coups*; her son did not.

'All of those occasions, Mum, every single one of them, were embarrassing. They caused me suffering – trauma, I expect. Well, the embarrassment quotient now is even higher. When this Colin maniac arrives, Rowland's *also* going to be here, and Rowland can be unpredictable. He might not like this . . .'

'Too bad.'

'He'll think you're making fun of his friend . . .'

'Make fun of my future husband? I wouldn't dream of it.'

'Mum, I'm warning you, and I mean it. *Don't*. You'll be making a mistake.'

Tom rose. He had spoken quietly, but there was suddenly no doubt that he was in earnest. Lindsay, who had been about to reply, stopped short. There was a silence. Consternation came into Lindsay's face.

'Do you mean that, Tom?'

'Yes, I do. Sometimes – I guess you just push too hard, all right?'

'Tom, wait a second now,' Katya began. 'Lindsay was teasing you. She didn't mean . . .'

'No, no, Katya – he's right.'

For one painful, peculiar moment, Katya thought Lindsay was about to cry. She realized that the act Lindsay put on was far more effective than she had conceived, and that for some reason Lindsay was under strain and deeply upset. She regained control very quickly, however. Looking at Tom, she made a face that was wry and contrite.

'I know, I know.' She gave a sigh. 'I push too hard and I talk too much, and perhaps – it's not very restful. I do understand that, but I was only teasing you, Tom – Katya's right. I liked Colin, and I wouldn't embarrass him. I didn't really intend to say anything . . .'

Tom smiled. 'Admit you were tempted.'

'Yes, I was.' Lindsay returned the smile. 'But I shan't say a word. He's bound to have forgotten, and I won't remind him. I promise to behave *impeccably*, all right?'

It was very rare for Lindsay to break a promise to anyone; with her son, every promise made was religiously kept. Tom, knowing this, at once relaxed; Katya, who had suddenly sniffed the cordite of trouble ahead, assumed that trouble had been avoided. Lindsay

became quieter and was perhaps tense, but the next half-hour passed pleasantly.

Everything was fine, fine, fine, Katya would later tell herself – until the moment when they heard the roar of an engine, and Katya, looking out of the window, saw a long, sleek monster of a sports car pull up.

VI

'It's an Aston Martin,' Tom said, awe in his voice. 'Oh my God, it's a DB5. *Classic* - I'm not missing this. I'll let them in . . .'

The door slammed shut behind him.

'I didn't know Rowland drove an Aston,' Katya said.

'He doesn't.'

'Well, he's driving one now. It must be your fiancé's. I guess.'

'Don't, Katya.' Lindsay gave a wan smile. She joined Katya at the window. Both women watched the tall dark-haired figure of Rowland McGuire emerge himself from the low-slung driving seat. He was wearing somewhat aged clothes, as he had been on most of the occasions Katya had met him; in this case an antique tweed jacket, a dark green sweater and ~~corduroys~~ corduroys. Clothes clearly did not interest Rowland McGuire in the least; Katya had decided that this was because Rowland tried to make no impression and cared neither to please nor attract. When Rowland entered a room, he did so as himself, arrogantly indifferent as to whether he was approved, ~~dismissed~~ after or dismissed. Sometimes Katya admired and sometimes she resented this.

Rowland did not appear to be in the best of health perhaps. He looked impatiently up and down the street, then glanced up at the house. Lindsay moved away from the window at once. Rowland, with Tom's assistance, then proceeded to lever and yank the ~~house's~~ passenger from his seat. This took some time.

eventually, like a recalcitrant cork from a bottle, a man popped out precipitately, head first. He protested volubly; his face had a greenish pallor and the thin November sunlight seemed to be paining his eyes, for he donned a pair of dark glasses at once. He walked with exaggerated care towards the door of the house, wincing as Rowland banged the car doors shut.

'Your fiancé has a hangover,' Katya said.

'What does he look like, my fiancé?'

'Well, he's not as tall as Rowland, but who is? He's about six feet, maybe six one or two . . . Even shabbier clothes than Rowland. Thin, quite elegant . . . Oh, he's sitting down on the garden wall . . . No, he's standing up again. He's talking to the privet hedge.'

'Just my luck. Not just a maniac, a dipsomaniac. Hair? Does my fiancé have hair? Black? Brown? White? Bald? Katya, tell me he isn't bald. I don't think I'm ready for a bald fiancé . . .'

'No, no, he has rather wonderful hair. Auburn. Byronic if you're being charitable; in need of a barber, if you're not. Hang on. Oh, he has excellent eyebrows - diabolic eyebrows; they go up in peaks . . .'

'Don't be absurd. You can't see his eyebrows from there.'

'I can. He just looked up. Oh - he's smiling. He's shaking hands with Tom. He has a very good smile. An angelic smile . . . Terribly *pale* though. Alabaster. I think he's about to pass out. What's he doing *now*? Oh, he's sitting on the doorstep. I think he's gone to sleep. Rowland *not* amused. Face like thunder . . . Riot act being read . . .'

Lindsay made a moaning sound. 'Oh, not one of Rowland's lectures. Katya, I'm not looking forward to this.'

'What a brave man. He's just told Rowland to piss off. Rowland not too amused by that either. Wait a

second – yes, he's vertical again. They're coming in. Brace yourself . . .'

Lindsay had ceased to listen, Katya realized. Turning, she watched Lindsay arrange herself, first on a chair, then opt for standing up. She was wearing very understated clothes, as she usually did, despite Tom's allegations. Fashion-pack black, Katya thought, examining Lindsay's flat black pumps; black tights; short, pleated, black skirt and black polo-neck sweater. Katya felt envious, as she always did, of Lindsay's boyish build; she herself was too curvaceous, or – as Katya put it in her more self-critical moments – Junoesque. She pulled down the baggy sweater she was wearing and crossed her arms over her breasts. The eyes of the two women met in mutual understanding; Lindsay's hands flew to her ear-rings, two delicate, pale jade tear-drops.

'Why did I wear this today? I look as if I'm going to a funeral . . .'

'You look fine, Lindsay. You look great. Those ear-rings are really pretty. Are those the ones Genevieve gave you?'

'Yes. Gini's goodbye present when she left for Washington. I – they're hurting my ears; I think I'll take them off . . .'

To Katya's surprise, Lindsay did so – and in an odd, furtive, hurried way too. As footsteps could be heard mounting the stairs, she thrust them into her pocket. She again sat down, then again stood up.

'I hate meeting people I don't know. It makes me so nervous. Shall we open some more champagne, Katya? Yes, let's. I'll replace it another time . . .'

Thus Lindsay created yet another of her diversions, Katya thought. It was not the arrival of a stranger, but of Rowland, that was making her nervous, Katya decided, watching her with some amusement and some pity. By the time the door was finally opened and introductions were being made, Lindsay was again

suffering a useful female difficulty with a champagne cork. This ensured that, within seconds of entering, Rowland McGuire and this Colin Lascelles were both caught up in an argument, Colin advocating shaking the bottle, Tom intervening to protest that wasted half the champagne, and Rowland quietly taking the bottle from Lindsay, kissing her on the cheek, greeting Katya, and opening the champagne without the least difficulty or fuss.

'Coffee might have been a wiser idea,' Rowland said, with a glance in Colin's direction. 'And strong black coffee, at that.'

'No, no, no. The worst possible thing.' Colin was already ensconced on the sofa; the dark glasses had been removed and he was beaming at everyone with a genial delight that suggested he had known them all for most of his life.

'Do you get hangovers, Tom? Katya? I had a hangover for three years when I was here. Alka-Seltzer; prairie oysters – none of that works. The best cure of all is a pink gin – but a glass of champagne is also excellent. Thank you, Lindsay. It settles the stomach, soothes the brain, reminds the legs how to walk . . .' He looked at Lindsay in a considering way, over the rim of his champagne glass; he hesitated.

'We did speak on the telephone yesterday, didn't we?'

'Last night, yes. But only very briefly . . .'

'Oh good, I thought we did. It's just – well, I was celebrating. A bit of a bender. Then Rowland was up at dawn, as usual, banging on the door, hauled me out of bed, made me pack – I kept asking him, what's the hurry? Another couple of years and I'd have slept it off. Now, I'm still feeling the after-effects: head a bit woozy, memory on the blink . . . So I wasn't sure—' His brow crinkled; he turned a pair of blue, innocent eyes on Lindsay and gave her an anxious look. 'I hope I made some sort of sense when we spoke? Rowland nagged –

he does that. Why did you call? What did you want? Was there a message? He kept it up in the car, for hundreds of miles – I had to go to sleep . . .’

‘There wasn’t really a message. Nothing important. I just wondered when Rowland was getting back. Don’t worry about it. I’d been at a party and I know how it is . . .’

‘A party?’ Rowland handed Lindsay some champagne. ‘And was it good?’

‘No, horrible. Something to do with a movie company called Diablo. Tomas Court’s new production company, oddly enough, Colin. In fact . . .’

‘Did you go on your own?’

‘No, Rowland, I went with Markov and Jippy. I talked to two homunculi, a man called me “babe”, and then I left.’

This précis, or the champagne, which she drank a little too fast, gave Lindsay courage. With a small glance in Rowland’s direction, she sat down on the cerise sofa next to Colin and began asking him about Yorkshire. Within minutes, Colin, visibly recovering, was launched on a saga only too familiar to Rowland. ‘That bloody, bloody man,’ Colin began, and Rowland moved off.

Lindsay listened with excessive attention; Tom and Katya were drawn into a discussion of Court’s movies and psychopathology. After pacing backwards and forwards in an unsettled way for some while, Rowland stationed himself near the shelves at the far end of the room where, with close and apparently pleasurable attention, he began to examine the books.

Rowland often absented himself in this way on such occasions, so no-one took much notice of this. When the discussion moved on to the subject of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, Katya rose to fetch the book in question. She found Rowland was holding her copy and examining it – presumably not reading it, since the book was upside down, she noted. As she approached, he corrected this

and turned the pages, the margins of which were filled with vituperative comments from Katya.

'Don't read those,' said Katya, blushing scarlet. 'Rubbish. Childish stuff. I wrote those a year ago, at least . . .'

The remark seemed to amuse Rowland. One of the most disconcerting aspects of the man, Katya thought crossly, was his unreadability. Impossible to tell now if he was amused by something she had written, or by her, or by himself. Rowland McGuire's intelligence always piqued her, and his proximity always made her physically self-conscious. When he was nearby her hands felt clumsy, she felt over-burdened with breasts and hips. Was it the contrast between her figure (womanly) and the adjective 'childish', that amused him? Or had she written something very stupid? Katya snatched at the book.

'You always that unforgiving?' Rowland remarked, relinquishing it.

'I don't forgive bad writing, no,' Katya snapped.

Another assessing, glinting, green glance was his only reply to this. Katya could not decide whether to withdraw or attack.

'Don't tell me you like it,' she said, half turning, and thus retaining the option of retreat.

'I like certain aspects of it, very much.'

Rowland appeared to have no interest in being challenged further. He took down another book from the shelves – Coleridge, Katya saw – and began reading. His other ability, to make her feel invisible, Katya had noticed before. She gave him a cutting look, returned to Tom, put her arm around him and sat down on the floor next to him. There she remained, seething and smiling, until Lindsay, stopping Lascelles in mid-sentence, rose and announced with tense animation that if they didn't leave immediately – *immediately* – they would miss the table she had booked for lunch.

The restaurant Lindsay had chosen was called Tennyson's. It was a large brasserie, much favoured by undergraduates, serving good, inexpensive Italian wines and the best hamburgers in Oxford. It was very crowded. Approaching their table, in an alcove flanked by potted palms, Lindsay noticed that the floor was oddly unsteady. It occurred to her that she had eaten no dinner the night before and no breakfast that morning; she had just consumed four glasses of champagne on an empty stomach, and this was disastrous. She had something she needed to say to Rowland, a confession that grew more urgent by the second. This confession, which she might have made on the telephone the night before, had she reached him, had to be made before Rowland returned to London and spoke to her editor, his old friend and colleague, Max Flaunders. She began to see that this confession could be made now, over lunch, and in front of the others. There were several advantages to that somewhat cowardly approach, not least that, if Rowland were angry – and he might well be angry – he would be constrained by their presence, and would have to keep his anger to himself.

Sober up, sober up, she muttered under her breath, looking at a wavering table, as waiters fussed with extra chairs. Important, she felt, to get the seating right . . .

Unfortunately, Colin Lascelles also had ideas about the seating; while Lindsay was still arguing silently with a potted palm, he put them into effect. Tom sat at the head of the table, with Katya next to him and Rowland beside her; Lindsay was seated opposite Rowland and next to Colin Lascelles. Rowland seemed indifferent to these arrangements, and preoccupied, but every time Lindsay looked up, she met his gaze. She would have to meet his gaze when she made the confession. She would do it soon, she promised herself. Maybe she should do it when the first course arrived, or perhaps

the second; no, at the pudding stage, that would be the moment, perhaps. Meanwhile, no wine, no wine at all, and masses of starch to soak up the champagne . . .

'And so,' Colin was saying, 'Court hired a team of private investigators because the police were getting nowhere, and the man was smart; he always called from phone booths, and he always called from out of state . . .'

'Weird,' said Tom. 'And this was going on when they made *Dead Heat*? That puts a whole new construction on that movie . . .'

'Before, during and after.' Colin nodded. 'It started around two years after their son was born, and I believe it's been continuing ever since.'

'Horrible.' Katya gave a small shiver. 'And he threatened them?'

'So I gather. Not Court himself, but Natasha Lawrence, yes. Also the son. So you can imagine . . .'

'Did he use a name? Why couldn't they trace him?'

'He moved around too fast, I think. And he did use a name – a false one, presumably. What was it? What was it? Something very ordinary – King, I think. That's it, King. Jack? John? No. *Joseph*, that was it.'

'Joseph?' Rowland said, speaking for the first time, and so suddenly that Lindsay jumped. 'Joseph King? You're sure that was the name?'

'Yes. Definitely.'

'Joseph?' Rowland said, 'or Joe? As in Joe King. As in Joking?'

'Good God.' Colin blinked. 'You're right – I was told Joseph, but there could be a pun. Joking. Joe King. I never thought of that.'

'Why did you never mention this to me, Colin?' Rowland gave him a sharp glance. 'I've had months from you on the subject of Tomas Court and you never said a word about stalkers, or threats.'

'I know,' Colin blushed, 'and I should have kept my

am, but only for a bit. I shall cover the New York collections next week and then I'm owed some holiday time, and then, soon, I'll be free. I'm giving up fashion. I'm giving up journalism. I'm remaking myself. I'm going to write a book: a biography of Coco Chanel, probably. So now you all have to congratulate me and drink to that.'

This announcement *did* produce a reaction. There was a brief, surprised silence, then a babel of questions: How? When? Why? Into this babel, Lindsay continued with her speech.

'I decided months ago really,' she went on. 'I just had to make myself do it. I've been working in fashion too long. I need a change . . .'

'Challenges!' Colin Lascelles put in. 'Quite right! Fresh fields and pastures new! I've *always* believed in that . . .'

'Woods. Fresh *woods* and pastures new,' Katya corrected. She leaned across and kissed Lindsay. 'Well done. You were *wasted* in fashion. I think that's totally brilliant . . .'

'Brave!' Tom said, rising and also kissing her. 'That's great - do I still get my allowance? Only kidding. Wow! I never thought you'd actually do it . . .'

'A toast.' Lascelles refilled glasses. 'To the fair Lindsay - may she succeed in whatever she does next . . .'

There was another buzzing outburst of questions and exclamations; Lindsay found these made her curiously blind and deaf. Then, as the blindness and deafness began to recede, she began to realize: Rowland McGuire had taken no part in this.

He left the food in front of him unfinished. With deliberate care, he aligned his knife and fork on the plate. Slowly and reluctantly, Lindsay raised her eyes to his face; his expression at once made her want to look away, but she found she could not.

'I see,' he said finally, in a quiet voice. 'Is this definite? Have you talked to Max?'

'I've given Max my letter of resignation, and talked to him. Yes.'

'When did you do that?'

'Last week. One day last week.'

'While I was away?'

'Yes, as it happens. That – that has nothing to do with it. I don't work with you any more, Rowland.'

'No, indeed not.'

Rowland's displeasure was very evident. His expression was cold; his tone was cold. Upon the convivial table a frost settled. Lascelles glanced at Lindsay, then at Rowland, his brow puckering, and his blue eyes puzzled.

'Well, I say good luck to Lindsay . . .' he began.

'I've no doubt you would.' Rowland's cold green gaze turned in his direction. 'Since you know nothing about the situation, that's easy enough.'

'Oh, come on, Rowland, what's the matter with you?' Lascelles frowned. 'I'm in favour of change. What's Lindsay supposed to do – stick it out for the pension plan and the gold watch? Nobody does that any more. If she doesn't feel fulfilled working in fashion, she ought to move on . . .'

'Is that the problem?' Rowland's gaze returned to a hot-faced Lindsay. 'You don't feel fulfilled?'

He pronounced the final word with distaste. Lindsay glared at him.

'As a matter of fact, yes. And there's no need to be so supercilious. "Fulfilled" is as good a word as any other. Colin's right. Lots of people change jobs at my age; they have to, these days. I've been doing this too long. I'm sick of offices and deadlines. I'm sick of all the bitchiness and neuroticism. I'm sick of trying to find something new to say about some damn stupid dress. I'm sick of studios and crazy locations. and planes and

hotels. I want to be in one place, and above all, I want to do something else.'

Rowland heard her out in silence. He frowned.

'This isn't one of your snap decisions then? You've been considering it for months? You never mentioned it to me.'

'You never asked,' Lindsay retorted. 'And I don't make snap decisions.'

'Oh, but you do.'

'Well, this isn't one of them. Listen, Rowland, if we were still working on the same paper, yes, I probably would have asked your opinion, but we're not. You edit the Sunday now; you're stuck up in that vast editor's suite, having meetings morning, noon and night . . .'

'We work in the same building; we work for the same group. What is this? I see you virtually every day. Three weeks ago, I was round at your flat and I raised this very issue; I got no response. You could have discussed this any time you wanted, Lindsay . . .'

'Well then maybe I *didn't* want to. Maybe I just wanted to make up my own mind, Rowland. I am capable of that. And you may find it hard to imagine, but there are other things I can do besides edit fashion pages . . .'

'I'm aware of that, as you have every reason to know.' This remark, quietly made, produced another silence. Katya, who had been watching this exchange with close attention, saw that Rowland's words seemed to distress Lindsay. Her face had been bright with defiance; she began some defiant reply, then something in his tone, perhaps a note of specific reproach, made her reconsider. She turned to Tom, who had also been watching with growing indignation.

'Tom? I haven't done the wrong thing, have I? I *had* to decide.'

'Whatever you decide's OK with me.' Tom shot Rowland an angry glance. 'Mum's had lots of other job

offers,' he went on. 'People are always trying to poach her . . .'

'Oddly enough, I'm aware of that too.'

'There was that TV company, last year. They wanted her to work on a big series – a history of fashion. That American magazine was chasing her. That publisher's been pursuing her for ages. Markov told me . . .'

'Markov. I see. I might have known it.' Rowland's expression hardened. 'Is he privy to all this? Is he behind this decision? That's bloody typical.'

'Who's Markov?' Colin Lascelles interrupted, swiftly. 'Can someone explain? I don't understand any of this. Why is there a problem? Lindsay—'

'Who's Markov? Well now, let me see.' Rowland leaned back in his chair, a dangerous glint in his eyes. 'Markov is a fashion photographer – a very gifted one; a somewhat subversive one. Markov is, without a doubt, one of the most affected men I've ever met in my life. However, he's clever. I even like him – up to a point. The trouble is, Markov is wildly irresponsible . . .'

'No, he's not,' Lindsay interrupted hotly. 'You scarcely know Markov. He's changed a lot since he met Jippy. He's a good, clever man, and I've known him for fifteen years, Rowland. I adore Markov, so you can just stop this . . .'

'I don't deny any of that,' Rowland cut across her. 'Will you listen? I said Markov is irresponsible, and if you think for ten seconds, you'll know I'm right . . . You've always been blind to Markov's faults—'

'Shall we have some more wine?' Colin interrupted, signalling to the waiter. 'Rowland, why don't you calm down? I—'

'Just stay out of this, Colin. Listen to me, Lindsay. Markov loves nothing better than stirring up trouble; he's an inveterate *meddler*, and he loves a drama. Is Markov going to worry if a job falls through? If you're

out of work? All he's interested in is gestures and schemes . . .'

'Just a minute, Rowland. Could I speak?'

'And you, for some reason I'll never damn well understand, actually *listen* to Markov. He comes to you with some hare-brained plot and you buy it. He says "Jump", and you jump. That man has an irrational, disproportionate influence over you, Lindsay, and I can hear him talking now. California-speak. "Fulfilment"? "Challenges"? Give me a break.'

'Damn it, Markov has *nothing* to do with this,' Lindsay snapped. 'And yes, I will have some more wine, Colin, thank you. Amazing as it may seem to you, Rowland, I made this decision on my own – without your help; without Markov's help. I didn't need your advice then and I don't want it now. Stop being so damn pompous. What gives you the right to run my life?'

The final question silenced Rowland, who had been about to interrupt. Possibly her remarks hurt him, Lindsay thought, at once regretting them. Rowland coloured, then turned away. From inside the hot swell of anger within her, she felt misery and shame welling up. Why, why, why did I do this, she thought. For several reasons, as Rowland had implied, she owed him a better explanation than this. Now, at a table with three other people present, and with a pleasant lunch irretrievably ruined, she could see no way of retracting that last unjust statement, or making amends. Then she realized that the reactions of the three other people present were rather different to her imaginings. Tom and Katya, she saw, were suppressing smiles; Colin Lascelles, who had seemed somewhat anxious, was refilling glasses; catching Tom's eye, he winked.

'Cat and dog,' Tom said. 'Tooth and claw. Argue, argue, argue. Sorry, Colin, they always do this.'

'They never agree on anything,' Katya put in. 'Not a movie, or a play, or a book.'

'She tells him he's interfering . . .'

'And arrogant, Tom. Don't forget that.'

'He accuses her of – What does he accuse her of, Katya?'

'I've lost count. Not listening. Not thinking. Talking too much. Being a typical woman – that's certainly come up.'

'Wasn't he domineering? Blind? Insensitive?'

'Definitely.' Katya made a delicate pause. 'And there, of course, Lindsay was right.'

'He had a point too; Mum does *talk*. Never draws breath.'

'Oh, Rowland does as well,' Colin said, joining in with a smile. 'He may take time to warm up, and he may choose his company, but once Rowland *starts* talking, there's no stopping him. Opinions too. When I first met Rowland, he was insufferable. If you *coughed*, he had an opinion. If you *sneezed*, he had an opinion. My sister, who was once very much in love with Rowland, used to say that . . .'

'Enough. That's it. Stop it right there . . .'

 Rowland raised his voice. 'We get the point.'

He hesitated, then smiled, then extended his hand to Lindsay across the table. His green eyes rested thoughtfully, but no longer coldly, on her face.

'I was wrong. I'm sorry, Lindsay. I wish you every possible good in anything you may do. I hope you know that.'

'I'm sorry too. I take back what I said.'

Lindsay clasped his hand; the handshake that then followed was so warm, so friendly, so fraternal, that Lindsay wanted to weep on the spot. Since she could not weep, she drank another glass of wine, and since that made her feel extraordinarily strengthened, another after that.

She waited until conversation resumed and the atmosphere eased. She waited until Rowland, Katya and Tom

became embroiled in an argument first about books, then Thomas Court's *Willow Song*, its connections to *Dead Heat*, and the significance of the spider sequence.

Katya was speaking with force; Lindsay sometimes suspected that Katya felt challenged by Rowland's Oxford first; always trenchant, she tended to become more so when Rowland was present; indeed Tom had once accused her of showing off. Now, she whipped *Othello* into the argument, then harnessed Freud; she crunched Tomas Court's view of women under her chariot wheels, then quoted some German philosopher Lindsay had never heard of, at length. Rowland listened patiently enough until Jung's aid was also marshalled, at which, seconded by Tom, he launched a counter-attack.

The air in the room was altering, Lindsay thought; cigarette smoke, perhaps; anyway, it was now eddying pleasantly, and was assuming a mauvish hue, wafting like mist. Realizing there was a key question she needed to ask, she turned back to the amiable, blue, innocent eyes of Colin Lascelles, and interrupted him.

'Tell me *all* about your sister, Colin,' she said.

Colin did tell her all about his sister, and very interesting it was. This subject, and variations upon it, opened a door, she found. Through that door, Lindsay began to see a younger Rowland McGuire, a different Rowland McGuire. She was busily inspecting these Rowlands, and trying to work out how they related to the Rowland she knew, although, of course, she did not know him enough, when she realized that other, less metaphorical doors must have opened, since they were no longer in the restaurant, but walking past glorious buildings, in a now darkening street. She was arm in arm with Colin Lascelles; he was leading her through a gateway, advancing into a large, misty quadrangle; there were

lighted windows, dark-gowned, hurrying figures; a chapel bell was tolling.

'It was here! It was on this exact spot!' Colin, releasing her arm, waved his own like a windmill, 'Chateau Margaux 1959! Two and a half bottles! And I was still standing up. Then I started to topple – very slowly, like a great pine; an eight-hundred-foot pine. I'd braved the storms for thousands of years, and then some giant took an axe to my roots. One blow! That's all it took. It took me a century to fall. I could see the paving-stones coming up . . . and then Rowland caught me. He saved me! He's been saving me ever since. It's thanks to Rowland that at this exact moment my life makes perfect sense! I have to thank him. Where is he? He was here a second ago . . .'

Colin whirled about, arms semaphoring. Rowland, who was standing two feet away, watching this performance with Tom and Katya, moved forward and caught hold of his arm firmly.

'Tom, we may have a problem,' he said.

'That was a wonderful speech, Colin,' Lindsay said, with warmth. 'I can see it. I can imagine it. Was it a cold night?'

'Cold? Bitterly cold. The witching hour! It was three o'clock in the morning. The night was pitch-black . . .'

'It was June. You take his other arm, Tom,' Rowland said.

'A pilgrimage!' Colin shrugged off these arms and took Lindsay's instead. 'I have to explain! Oh, God, *God*. Lynne, there's another place I have to show you. It's not far. It's on the way back. It's just round this corner and up the street . . .'

It was neither around the corner, nor up the street, but they eventually found it. In an ecstasy, Colin paused on a bridge.

'Lisa,' he said, clasping Lindsay's hands, 'you have wise eyes, d'you know that? You have these beautiful

wise, sad, grey eyes. I could look at your eyes all night.'

'Thank you, Colin.' Lindsay hugged him. 'I think they're grey too – in certain lights.'

'They're *brown*,' said Tom. 'Give me strength.'

'Or hazel,' said Rowland, his manner meditative. 'Tom, you know that sofa in your room? Well, I rather think . . .'

'Down here, darling!' Colin plunged towards some steps. He helped Lindsay down them with great gallantry. Lindsay found herself on what might have been a tow-path. It was very dark. She could smell river water, and then see the gleam of light on its surface.

'This is the canal! Do you see those barges, Linda? Can you see the barges up ahead?'

Lindsay found she could see them.

'People live on these barges, Lynne. It's just along here. It's this one. No, that one! That's it! The one with poppies painted on it. Well, on this barge here, lived a most beautiful woman. She was a painter, I think. My Lady of Shalott. She had long golden hair. What was her name, Rowland?'

'I forget.'

'This was a long time ago, Lisa – you do understand that?'

'I do. Years and years ago, Colin.' Lindsay leaned over the water. Rowland pulled her back.

'Exactly. Decades. And this beautiful girl – I was mad about her. Completely mad. Obsessed. This was when I was an undergraduate – before I met you, of course.'

'Of course.'

'I wrote sonnets! Songs! I dreamed about her every night! If I saw her for two seconds, I was happy for a week . . .'

'A month.' Lindsay gave a deep sigh. 'Longer, sometimes . . .'

'You understand! I knew you would.' Colin embraced her tenderly. 'I wrote her letters, Lindsay . . .'

'But you never sent them . . .'

'You're right! It felt like spring!'

'It did. April. Did it feel like April, Colin?'

'Like April. Like the darling buds of May. I could do anything. I had all this energy . . .'

'You wanted to dance? Sometimes you wanted to dance?'

'I did. Then I'd weep. Just once or twice.'

'Occasionally, Colin. You wept occasionally, when despair hit.'

'That's it! Despair! Oh God, *God*. I'd forgotten that. But I despaired all the time, because she didn't love me; she loved someone else. It was *hell*. Unmitigated *hell*, now I look back.'

'Oh, Colin.' Lindsay put her arms around him. She looked at him very closely. The tow-path was beginning to ripple pleasantly. Colin put his arms around her waist. 'Colin, that's so sad. I know exactly how that feels. Tell me, did you get this sort of *ache*?'

'In the heart? Yes, I did. But none of that matters now, Lindy, because . . . Oh God. You have the most beautiful eyes I've ever seen in my life. What shall we do? Shall we sit down? Walk? Talk? I want to talk to you all night. There's something I have to tell you . . .'

'Time to go, Colin.' Rowland had been listening to this exchange with the closest attention. Now, as Lindsay and Colin began to sit down on the edge of the barge, he took Colin's arm in a firm grip. He led him towards the steps.

'Up you go, Colin. No, no arguments. Tom, if you pull him, and Katya, you push . . . That's it. Well done. Your room's not far, luckily. You go on ahead with him . . . Now, Lindsay, these steps are a bit slippery.'

'They're not.'

'It's deceptive. The light here's not too good. If I just took your arm, perhaps? There. You see? Now, take hold of my hand . . .'

'You have very nice hands, Rowland. They're warm. I noticed your hands the first time I met you; they're strong. Strong hands.'

'It's the climbing, I expect.'

'I worry about the climbing.' Lindsay came to an abrupt halt on the bridge. 'Where's Colin?'

'He's gone on ahead. Don't worry about Colin.'

'All right, but I do worry about the climbing. I was worried last night, that's why I called, I think . . .' She frowned, shook her head, raised her face and inspected Rowland closely.

'I could see you, Rowland. The rope broke. You were tumbling over into this *chasm* . . .'

'Yes, well, that's happened to me once or twice.'

'Really?'

'No, not really. Maybe if you lean on me a little, Lindsay.'

Lindsay leaned on him; it felt pleasant. She gave a small shiver of delight. Rowland put his arm around her waist and they began walking again. Dimly ahead of them, on some other planet, Lindsay could see her son and his girlfriend, and someone else. The someone else was singing; Lindsay liked the song the someone else had chosen; it was a sweet and melodious lament. Neither she nor Rowland spoke; they advanced along a heavenly road; its paving shone; the dark air was necklaced with lights. Rowland sighed. 'Lindsay, Lindsay,' he said gently. 'Whatever's wrong? You never do this.'

'My life's changing . . .' Lindsay emitted a sobbing sound which startled her. 'My life won't lie down, Rowland. It won't obey the rules any more. I can't . . . I can't . . .'

'What can't you?'

'I used to know where north was. Now I don't. It's moved, Rowland. Sometimes it's in the south, or the east . . .'

'That happens.'

'I hate it. I hate it happening. Rowland, it makes me afraid. Does it happen to you?'

'Sometimes. Yes, it does.'

'I might cry, Rowland. I can feel it coming on. Oh, damn.'

'I don't mind, Lindsay. Truly. Cry all you like.'

Lindsay did so. She wept piteously for several streets. Then she found they were standing outside a house which looked familiar; its front door was open. Lindsay leaned against Rowland, who put his arms around her. She watched this door; from it, eventually, emerged her son and someone who proved to be Katya. This confused Lindsay, who had been expecting someone else.

'He's out cold, on the sofa. Dead to the world,' said her son.

'Tom, I'm sorry about this—'

'It's cool. No worries, Rowland. Cressida-from-upstairs did it the other week.'

'Now listen, Tom. He may feel he wants to fight you. If he does, say you'll fight him in the morning – then he'll go back to sleep. Coffee when he wakes; lots of it. Oh, and Katya, one thing . . .'

'Yes, Rowland?'

'He may propose, at a certain stage; he's been known to do that . . .'

'So I gather.'

'It's a good idea to accept him; that way you avoid the maudlin stage, which generally comes next. I'll take Lindsay's car and drive her back to London. Meanwhile, just to be on the safe side . . . Lindsay, lean on Tom for just a minute, would you? Oh, she's asleep. Hang on . . .'

There was a pause while Tom propped his mother up and Rowland opened the bonnet of the Aston. He removed the rotor arm and handed this and the car keys to Tom.

'That's usually the best solution. He knows how to put it back, but he can't manage it until he's completely sober. I'm very grateful to both of you. I'll call you in the morning . . .'

There was movement and Lindsay began to wake up. Someone soft, who smelled of rose petals, kissed her. This was comforting, although a small voice in Lindsay's mind kept insisting that there was something wrong with that kiss. She was still trying to puzzle out what that might be while her son reproved her, and possibly lectured her, but appeared to forgive her. She had the sensation that this son of hers found something amusing; she was hugged, heard footsteps, then a door shut.

Immediately, as the door closed, two very strong arms encircled her and she found her damp face pressed against wool; the voice in her head now spoke with clarity; a clarion call. Of course, it was not the nature of that kiss which had been wrong, it was the *identity* of the person who bestowed it. She lifted her head and inspected Rowland's features for some while. He did not appear to be angry; he might have been amused. He looked puzzled by something. He had the greenest eyes she had ever seen. She looked at the lamplight on his hair. She looked at green affection, green regret.

'Lindsay, Lindsay,' he said, and smoothed back her hair and looked at her face. 'You really are terribly drunk, you know . . .'

'I am,' Lindsay agreed. 'It feels wonderful, Rowland. Wondrous. Your eyes are very green. Astonishingly green . . .'

'And yours are hazel; not brown, not grey. Around the iris, they're darker. I've never noticed that.' There was a pause. 'What are you doing, Lindsay?'

'I'm kissing your sweater,' said Lindsay, who was. 'I think I might kiss you. Yes. You're so tall. If you could just bend down a little bit, Rowland . . .'

Rowland did. Lindsay gently kissed his cheek, then

his nose, then, as her aim improved, his mouth. Rowland did not appear to resist. They kissed chastely, in the lamplight, and when they drew apart, Lindsay saw that Rowland's expression was now sad. She made no comment on this.

Her handbag was found, and her keys, and her little car. One minute Rowland was lifting her into it, the next second he was lifting her into what she recognized as her bed. He removed her shoes and neatly aligned them next to the bed. He turned her on her side and covered her with a duvet. He switched off the bedside lamp and then stood in the stripe of light from the hall, looking down at her, his hair ruffled, his hands in his pockets. Lindsay, opening her eyes, then closing them again, thought he still had that puzzled, thoughtful expression on his face. During the night, at some point in the night, negotiating a dream, then a nightmare, Lindsay woke. She did not know where, when, who or what she was: she gave a little cry, swung her legs out of bed and felt her way into the shadows of her sitting-room. At first she thought that it was empty, then she saw it was not. Arms folded, Rowland was seated on the sofa, frowning into space. Lindsay came to a halt in the doorway.

'Would you talk to me, Rowland?' she said.

'Of course.' He held out an arm. Lindsay curled up on the sofa next to him and rested her head against his shoulder. Rowland put his arm around her; minutes ticked.

'So, what shall I talk about?' Rowland said after some while.

'Anything. Ordinary things. I just like to hear your voice.'

'Well, let's see.' She thought he smiled. 'I've been useful. I've washed up one cup, one saucer and one plate - I'm used to washing up ones of things. I checked your answerphone for you, because the light was driving me mad - flash, flash, flash.'

'Oh, I hope someone interesting called.'

'Markov did, from Greece. He said he and Jippy were sitting outside a temple; I forget to which god. Max called. Someone called Lulu-something called, I've written it down . . .'

'Lulu Sabatier? I won't be calling her back.'

'Then I'd called – this morning. So I listened to myself, which is always disconcerting; I sounded like someone else.' He might have frowned; he sighed.

'Then, let's see, I read for a while, but I couldn't seem to concentrate. I thought about Scotland: Skye, where I've been climbing . . .'

'Tell me about where you were climbing. I had a horrible dream. It will make my dream go away. Make me see your mountains, Rowland.'

'Well, you've seen those photographs at my house. I remember you looking at those, the first time you ever came there.'

'I remember too.' Lindsay closed her eyes. She could remember the occasion only too well, since it was then she had first realized she was in love with Rowland McGuire. It was then this entire débâcle had begun; this, of course, could not be said. 'There was one particular mountain,' she went on. 'A mountain with an impossible name . . .'

'Sgurr Na Ghilleann. I climbed it again on this visit. Provided the weather holds – and in the Cuillin the weather can change within minutes, which is why they can be dangerous, of course – there's a place you can reach; it's technically quite a difficult climb, a nasty overhang, but once you're around that – if the weather is clear, and it was last week – you're rewarded with an astounding view. You can look out across the Minch, and each one of the Outer Hebrides islands, you can see them, or their outlines; a black necklace of islands on the horizon. They look . . .'

He hesitated. 'They look too beautiful to be real, like the Hesperides,

perhaps. Then, sometimes, the rain comes in, or a mist appears from nowhere, and you lose sight of them. They disappear, and you think you imagined them . . . ' He hesitated again. 'Whenever I'm there, I feel . . . '

'Tell me, Rowland.'

'I feel as if, finally, I've arrived in the right place, as if questions were unimportant, as if I were beyond questions, maybe. I can't explain, I just like being there, looking at those islands. After those islands, there's nothing, just open sea, thousands upon thousands of miles of sea - sea all the way to America, or to Newfoundland, perhaps . . . '

He stopped speaking and silence fell. The silence, to Lindsay, felt huge and deep, like a benign ocean. She could see herself and Rowland very clearly, sailing across this Atlantic in some small yacht or skiff; the wind caught its sails; for the first time in her friendship with Rowland she felt she could ask questions - questions could be risked.

'Are you happy, Rowland?' she asked quietly, tensing a little, for he might resent this.

'Now?' He showed no sign of resentment. 'I feel happy now, oddly enough.'

'No, I didn't mean that. I meant, generally. Day by day. Night by night.'

'Not really, no. Not in that sense. But I'm happy - enough.'

'May I ask you something else?'

'You may.' He smiled. 'I'll even answer, I expect.'

'Have you ever loved anyone, Rowland?'

'Yes, twice.'

'And what came of it?'

'Nothing came of it.' He paused. 'The first woman I loved is dead; her name was Esther. She was killed in Washington DC, a month before our marriage; that happened a long time ago. And the second . . . ' He

paused again. 'Nothing came of it. It ended some time ago.'

Lindsay heard the decision to disclose no more in his voice; she had expected the closing of that particular door.

'Nothing ever came of my marriage,' she said, in a rushed way, bending her head. 'It took me years to see that. You could say Tom came of it, of course, except that I never think of Tom as coming from my marriage. Tom is my blessing, my gift from the gods. But Tom actually came from — you can imagine, Rowland — nothing special; nothing glorious. A night when I was miserable, when my husband was drunk . . .'

'Don't, Lindsay.'

'No, you're right. I won't. It doesn't matter anyway, because Tom changed my life. He — as soon as I held him in my arms — he wasn't a pretty baby, even I could see that. He had this dark hair then, Rowland. He was like his father with dark hair. I was so proud of that lovely hair, and then later, he rubbed it off, on his pillow, in his cradle, and the next hair that grew was fair, like his father's . . .'

'Lindsay. Dear Lindsay. Don't cry.'

'I don't mean to cry. I don't know why I'm crying. I'm happy really. I love Tom so much. I just wish . . . I just wish . . . I wish he'd grown up with a proper father. Some man — not the man who is his father, because he didn't care, and he should have cared, and I'll never forgive him for not caring for Tom as long as I live . . .'

'When did he leave? Tell me, Lindsay.'

'When Tom was six months old. There was some girl, I think; there usually was. All the time, really. When I was pregnant, before, after. I didn't find that out until later, of course. He — well, he lied a lot.'

'Lindsay—'

'It's all right. I can see it in perspective now; I couldn't then. He turned up again, when Tom was about eighteen months old. He'd turn up, beg to come back, then he'd

stay a day or two, sometimes a week. After a while, I began to see – he only came if he wanted to borrow money, or if he had nowhere else to sleep, so I threw him out. But even then, I still used to write and send him photographs. I sent him pictures of Tom for years. First as a baby, then as a little boy, on holiday, his first day at school – things like that. I was so bloody obstinate . . .’

‘Lindsay, don’t get upset. Here—’

‘I kept thinking, it didn’t matter if he didn’t love me, but he had to love Tom. Even if he wasn’t a good father, he was the only father Tom had, and Tom needed him. So I kept on *hoping*, in this weak, stupid, futile way – and then one day, I suddenly stopped. I realized – he was such a shit. I didn’t like him; I didn’t respect him, and Tom was better off without him. After that—’

‘You never thought of marrying again?’

‘No.’

‘Why not?’

‘No-one asked me, actually,’ Lindsay said, in a small voice. She began to laugh, then cry. ‘Which is just as well, because I might have said yes, and I can see now that would have been a terrible mistake. I’ve had quite a lot of unmemorable lovers, Rowland . . .’

‘So have I.’

‘Dull as ditch-water, most of them. *Prudent*. I had a thing about prudent men, for a bit.’

‘Because of Tom?’

‘I expect so. And – there was one who kept his loose change in a purse; he was pretty bad. There was another one who, when we went out to dinner, he always tipped precisely eight and a half per cent. It took him hours calculating it. I left him in mid-soup . . .’

‘Mid-soup?’

‘I just got up and walked out. It was minestrone. He was talking about pension plans. I think he might have been about to propose, actually, now I look back. I

expect that's why I fled. I don't really like prudent men. I – I'm not very prudent myself – I expect you've noticed that – and I didn't really want a husband anyway; I wanted a father for Tom, which wasn't fair on them, and – I'm sorry about tonight, Rowland. I've been a fool. I'm ashamed. Reeling around on that bridge. I've embarrassed everyone . . .'

'You haven't embarrassed me.'

'Oh, *hell*. Now I'm really starting to cry. I'll make your jacket all wet. Rowland . . .'

'I've got a handkerchief somewhere. Wait, I'll do it. There.' He dried her eyes, then kissed her forehead. 'Now, look at me, Lindsay . . . No, look at me properly. Now, do I look embarrassed?'

Lindsay looked at him for a long time. She looked at his dark hair and his shadowed eyes; any harshness in his features was softened by the half-light. She lifted her hand and rested it against his face.

Rowland took her hand and clasped it in his own. He gave a sigh, leaned back and gathered her more comfortably against him. He looked away across the room and made no reply. Lindsay, positioning herself so she could look up at him, saw his expression was now bleak.

She tightened her grip on his hand and rested her head against his shoulder. She watched the quiet rise and fall of his chest; she let the quietness of the room enter her veins. All the words she would have liked to say, and all the comfort she would have wished to give, rose up in her heart like a tide. Her feelings were of the utmost eloquence, but words would not contain them. Perhaps silence could speak, she thought, hoping it was so. She pressed his hand, then raised it to her lips. She kissed his knuckles.

'You're still crying,' Rowland said.

'Only a bit. I'll stop soon. I'm glad you're here.'

'I'm glad I'm here too.'

'I wish things were different for you, Rowland. I

wish that things had worked out. That you weren't alone . . .'

'I'm used to it.'

'You ought to have children, Rowland . . .'

'I know that.'

' . . . I watch you with Tom sometimes, and I think – you'd make such a fine father . . .'

'Would I? I hope so.' He hesitated. 'I sometimes wish—'

'What do you wish?'

'Oh, the usual things: that the plot had worked out differently, I expect.'

'Tell me, Rowland; talk to me. You're too reserved; it's not good to be as reserved as you are . . .'

'Maybe not.' He shifted her position a little, so she was curled in his arm, and they sat for some while in silence. Lindsay closed her eyes; was it three in the morning, four? The city was almost silent; its stir had subsided; no cars passed; it was quiet in the dusky room, the only sound their breathing, and quiet in the streets.

After a while, Rowland began speaking again. He continued to hold her hand, and he told her innumerable things, in no particular order, but perhaps, she thought, as they played before his eyes, or swam into his head.

He described the small farm his Irish father had owned on the west coast of Ireland, which he had left when he was eight, after his father's sudden death. He described living in London with his English mother, and his school, his scholarship; then, jumping over years, spoke of his mother's unyielding character and her lingering death. He talked of the purchase of his strange and beautiful house in the East End of London, and then – houses being perhaps the association – he described Colin's search for Wildfell Hall and the house near the sea, which he and Colin had eventually found, and which Tomas Court appeared to like.

From this house, he said, a path led down to a remote

and little-visited beach, a horseshoe between two headlands. There, only a few days ago, while Colin remained at the house, taking his photographs and making his notes, Rowland had walked. Shells underfoot, shells pulverized by the waves; the cry of gulls as they swooped; a heavy sea, the tide racing in and engulfing the rocks.

Lindsay, eyes closed, her body warmed by his, listened to the crunch of those shells underfoot; she listened to the scream of the gulls, the heave of the tide, and listening to them, watching Rowland alone on a pale, shrinking strand, she fell asleep.

The next morning, that morning, when it was light, she woke to a changed Rowland, or perhaps to a more familiar Rowland, a man who had reverted, who was considerate, but distant again, kindly and polite. It was only six, but he was preparing to leave. Lindsay watched him numbly. She felt as if someone had injected novocaine into an artery; novocaine was numbing the muscles of her face; novocaine impeded her breathing and interfered with her voice.

'I haven't been fair to you, Rowland,' she said, finally, when he was almost at the door, the words jamming, then coming out in a rush. He turned.

'I'm sorry. I wanted to say something at lunch yesterday and then I couldn't. I wanted to say something last night – and I forgot . . .'

'Lindsay, it doesn't matter. It's irrelevant now, in any case.'

'It isn't. It isn't. Three weeks ago you made me a proposal, an offer – a very generous one. You gave me the time to think about it, and . . .'

'Lindsay, you obviously don't want the job. That's all right. I was a little confused, when you announced your resignation, your plans. And disappointed, obviously. But I understand now . . .'

'Stop, Rowland. Please don't. I'm so sorry, I hate myself for this. You've shown confidence in me and look how I've repaid you. I sat there at lunch, letting Tom and Colin and Katya criticize you, and I didn't explain the real situation. You could have given me away if you'd wanted to, taken me to task – and you didn't. Oh damn, damn . . .'

She turned her face away to hide her distress. Rowland took her hand and turned her to him.

'Forget about that,' he said. 'Lindsay, I don't care what they said or thought. Listen to me, we've always worked well together. I know you could do this job. Won't you at least think about it?'

'Rowland, no. I have thought about it, and I've decided. I've signed the contract for this book. I'm committed . . .'

'It isn't that. I don't believe you.' He was watching her closely. 'There's some other problem. You don't want to work with me, is that it?'

Lindsay looked away. To accept this job would mean working with Rowland McGuire in the closest proximity; that would destroy all her peace of mind. The only way in which she was going to cure herself of Rowland was to see him less and to put distance between them. She was now even more certain of this.

'Tell me,' Rowland said, when she had not replied. 'Look at me, Lindsay. Is it that you don't want to work with me? Is that so bad a prospect? Why? I know I can be infuriating – you tell me often enough. But we understand one another now; we know one another so well – don't you feel that?'

'In certain ways, maybe. But—'

'We make a good team. We spark ideas off one another. Even the fights are useful . . .'

A glint of amusement came into his eyes, then his expression became doubtful again, and his manner somewhat awkward. 'I'd rather you said, Lindsay. I – well, I didn't

expect you to turn me down. I thought – I can only assume now . . .’

‘Rowland, *don’t*. You know I like working with you; I always did – and you taught me a great deal. I’ve told you that often enough . . .’

‘No, you haven’t actually.’

‘Then I’m telling you *now*. This decision has nothing to do with you personally, Rowland. Try to understand. I’ve spent twenty years, more, in an office. I’ve spent twenty years going to the collections, twenty years catching planes and chasing around the world. I’ve had *enough*, of fashion *and* of journalism; I don’t want deadlines to dictate the rest of my life. Rowland, I never had a choice before – Tom depended on me, my mother depended on me; we had to have my salary, come what may. But now I *do* have a choice. I can write this book; I *want* to write this book – and if it’s a success, maybe I could write others. I’m looking forward to it, Rowland. You wait . . .’ She smiled. ‘In a few months’ time, you won’t recognize me. I’ll have become an archive junkie, a library addict. I’ll be filling up all these notebooks with research . . .’

It was, she thought, a seamless blend of truth and falsehood, and it was effective.

‘An archive junkie?’ Rowland also smiled. ‘I admit I can’t quite imagine that.’ He paused. ‘You promise me that this is what you truly want?’

‘Ah, what do women want?’ Lindsay made a face. ‘I wouldn’t go that far, but it’s what I want to do.’

‘I shall miss you, you know. The office won’t seem the same without you. Who’s going to cut me down to size if you aren’t there?’

‘You’ll find someone. You know you never listened anyway . . .’

‘You’re wrong. I did.’

There was a silence. During it, Rowland suddenly seemed to realize that he was still holding her hand; he

released it at once. Exhibiting an indecision that was not characteristic of him, he turned to the door, then back again.

'Lindsay, I'll have to go. I have a mountain of work to get through before tomorrow. The trouble with going away is that the workload doubles when you get back. I'd have liked . . . I have a bad week coming up, meetings back to back . . . When are you leaving for New York?'

'On Thursday. I'm staying on after the collections to do some fashion shoots. Then - Max has been generous about notice, and I'm owed that holiday time - I'll come back after Thanksgiving, maybe. I thought of going down to Washington DC for a few days to . . .'

Lindsay stopped abruptly. She feared that Rowland might query Washington as a destination, in which case she would have to say her friend Gini's name and watch him feign indifference. To her surprise and relief, he did not.

'Washington? I have to go over there sometime too - we're having negotiations with the *Post*. Except, no, it's not likely our visits would coincide. Damn! Thursday? Perhaps - Look, I'll call you later this evening, shall I do that?'

'I'm going out this evening, Rowland,' Lindsay replied untruthfully, staring hard at the floor. The reply checked Rowland, whose air of agitation and indecision increased.

'Yes, well, I'll talk to you before you leave for America. We could - you might like dinner one night . . .'

'I don't think that will be possible. I'm rushing about this week, and . . . I'll see you when I come back, Rowland.'

Steeling herself, Lindsay reached up on tiptoe and briefly kissed his cheek.

'Thank you for everything,' she said, in a steadier

voice. 'You sorted me out, yesterday, and last night. You're a very good father confessor, Rowland. I feel much better now. A bit hung-over, of course ...'

'Sleep. Get some sleep ...' Rowland replied. 'Promise me now ...'

'I promise,' Lindsay replied meekly, and with this assurance, Rowland finally left.

Lindsay watched the door close. Everything and nothing, she said to herself. She found she was trembling with the effort of deception; the unspoken and the unspeakable rose up in a wash of regret. She returned to her sitting-room and looked around her blindly. She had done what she had promised herself she would do, and now Rowland's absence emptied the room of all content.

She touched the cushion he had leaned against the previous night; she touched the sofa-arm where his hand had rested. She tried to remember the strange calm and peace she had felt as he talked to her in those pre-dawn hours; it had been the first, and presumably the last time that he had let her into his life.

Remembering his words, she took out the pale jade tear-drop ear-rings she had removed the previous day and weighed them in her hand. Her friend Gini had given her these ear-rings, and it was her friend Gini, she knew, to whom Rowland had referred the previous night.

Nothing might have come of it, as he had said, but Rowland had been in love with Gini, and she had possibly returned that love. They had had an affair, briefly, in Paris, some three years before, after which Gini had returned to her lover, the war photographer Pascal Lamartine. Reunited, they had married and had a son. None of the participants had ever discussed these events, but she had been their mute witness. Possibly Rowland still retained a lingering regard for Gini; perhaps he did not. She would never have countenanced

asking him, and she knew he would have given her no answers if she had.

She looked down at the ear-rings, a gift from a friend younger than herself, and beautiful in a way Lindsay knew she could never be. Not for the first time in her life, she protested silently at the unfairness of beauty, an accident which could make the best of men blind, then she thrust the ear-rings in a drawer, out of sight.

It was much later, and only when the church bells began ringing, first one set, then another, a series of answering chimes, summoning a city of non-worshippers to worship, that she remembered it was Sunday, worst day of the week yet again. The endlessness of that particular day weighed in upon her; but Lindsay had learned resilience, and she took comfort in the knowledge that she had executed the first part of her plans. She took greater comfort from the fact that, next Sunday, she would not be here in this empty apartment, but in a different city, one she had always loved – New York.

Bright lights, a heavy schedule, no time to think; she was sitting contemplating the advantages of that city when she remembered Jippy's curious parting words. 'York,' he had said, and of course 'York' might indicate a city in America, every bit as much as Yorkshire.

At precisely this moment, her telephone rang; it rang twice, in swift succession. The first call, from some mumbling person claiming to work for Lulu Sabatier, she allowed her machine to field. The second, from an apparently sober and chastened Colin Lascelles, she answered herself.

BONFIRE NIGHT

VII

‘Remember, remember, the fifth of November – Gunpowder, treason and plot . . .’

Rowland, locking his car doors, turned, was about to walk on, then stopped. The speaker, he saw, was a young Bengali boy, aged about ten. He and another older Bengali boy had stationed themselves outside the Hawksmoor church opposite Rowland’s Spitalfields house. Between the boys, propped up against the railings of the churchyard, was a guy, a well-made guy. It was stuffed with newspaper and shredded computer printouts, some of which were escaping from ankles, fat waist and throat. On its feet was a pair of women’s Indian slippers; on its head was a turban; the ensemble was completed by a torn, very English tweed jacket and a tattered Nike track suit. In the dim street lighting, the guy’s face mask grinned at him; from some distance away, a rocket fizzed into the dark sky and exploded in a burst of golden stars, high up.

It was years since he had seen a guy, Rowland realized. When he was a boy, when he first came to London to live, these straw men, these hollow men, had been commonplace in the weeks leading up to Bonfire Night; children stationed them outside tube stations, on street corners, outside firework shops. He paused, looking at the malevolent mask, and with a rush, his childhood came back. He remembered the gorgeousness and gaudiness of the fireworks themselves, the black aromatic powder that leaked from them; he thought of the solemn ceremony every year, his mother and

himself, wrapped up in coats, alone in a neglected North London back garden, positioning rockets in milk bottles, lining up magic on a garden wall: Vesuvius, Krakatoa. Light the blue touch-paper, stand well back.

He looked at the two boys, who were shivering with cold. This area in the East End of London, always a refugee area, lived in over the centuries by French Huguenots, then Jewish immigrants, was now predominantly Bengali. Rowland wondered if these two boys knew the history of Guy Fawkes and the gunpowder plot, and if so whether it could have any meaning to them: it had little meaning to him. He put his hand into his coat's breast pocket, and the two boys looked at him expectantly.

'The going rate used to be a penny,' Rowland said, with a smile. 'I imagine it's gone up . . .'

The boys exchanged glances; they looked, in a pointed way, at the upturned hat next to the guy on the pavement. It contained a collection of ten and twenty pence coins; prominently displayed, in the centre, was a one pound coin and a fifty pence piece.

'Inflation, innit?' said the older boy, giving Rowland an impertinent look.

Rowland withdrew his hand from his pocket and took out his wallet. The boys tensed. Rowland dropped a five pound note into the hat, complimented them on the excellence of the guy, and then, ashamed at his own sentimentality, walked away fast. Whoops of jubilation and derision greeted this generous evidence of his own gullibility; glancing back over his shoulder as he reached his house, Rowland saw that the two boys had decided, perhaps on the strength of his contribution, to pack it in; they were departing, dragging the grinning corpse of the guy up the street.

Rowland let himself into the cold and the silence of his early-eighteenth-century house. It did not possess central heating, and modern heating systems might have

damaged the panelling, in any case. Rowland had never minded its familiar winter chill, and its calm, its silence, he had always loved. Taking pity on it, buying and rescuing it some fourteen years before, when it had been in a state of ruinous neglect, he had found he wanted to change it as little as possible. The creeping dangers which threatened its structures and its beauties, the damp, the dry rot, the leaking roof and decaying timbers, had been cured. Standing alone in the unfurnished first-floor sitting-room when all this work was finally complete, he had closed the shutters to the tall windows, and for the first time lit a fire. It caught instantly and burned well; its flames burnished the panelled walls and danced upon the bindings of his books.

With the crackling of flames and the creaks of old timbers adjusting to heat, Rowland had had an acute sense of his home's past: he had thought of the French Protestant refugees who had been the first occupants here over 250 years before, several of whom lay buried in the sombre city churchyard beyond, and he had felt that, like them, he was not truly the owner of this house, but its tenant or custodian. It would outlast him, as it had outlasted them. In a new millennium, others would stand here, as he did, and perhaps sense, as he did now, past joys and past griefs, some of which he would no doubt have contributed himself.

This thought, that he was part of the house's continuum, destined to become one of its spirits and whispers, had contented him then. Now, he found he was restless, less calmed by these four walls; for reasons he could not grasp, and was reluctant to examine, the silence and familiarity here now agitated him. He would sometimes have the sensation that the house was waiting for something to happen, that it resented being empty by day, and under-occupied by night. It possessed four bedrooms, only one of which was regularly used; the other three, occupied occasionally by friends passing

through London, had a melancholy reproachful air; Rowland kept their doors closed, disliking this.

That evening, his first free evening since returning from Yorkshire, he had brought work home with him, as he usually did. He lit the fire in the sitting-room and waited for the warmth to dispel the house ghosts. These ghosts, of past losses, approximations and ill-timings, of hopes that had once fired Rowland, but no longer did, were reluctant to depart. They lurked in the corners of the room; angry with them and with himself, he switched on all the lamps in an attempt at banishment. The lamplight was ineffective since, as Rowland knew perfectly well, these ghosts had their being in him; it was his blood they fed upon, and they emanated, grey and disconsolate, from himself.

It had perhaps not been such a good idea, he thought wryly to himself, to have bought a refugee house; nor was it wise to indulge the kind of early evening melancholy hundreds of city-dwellers no doubt experienced. He was tired; he felt overworked and hungry – that was why, as soon as the front door closed, he now heard the whispers and reproaches of the dispossessed.

Hunger, anyway, was easily assuaged. Rowland went downstairs to his kitchen – a kitchen Lindsay described as charming but primitive. In one of the old battered saucepans – he could remember Lindsay cooking him scrambled eggs in that saucepan, the first time she came here – he heated up some canned soup. He made himself a sandwich, and some minutes later, found he had eaten it.

The food revived him. He returned upstairs to find the fire blazing, the room warm and the ghosts suppressed. He telephoned Lindsay, who was departing for New York early the next day, and found her number was engaged. In a desultory way, he began dealing with the backlog of mail, which had been reproaching him all week. A month before, he had sent a brief, formal

letter of condolence to Gini, formerly Hunter, now Lamarine, on the death of her father. He had half-expected that a reply, no doubt equally formal, might be here, amidst this pile of buff envelopes; it was not, and he found he could accept this without disappointment; maybe he had begun to acquire indifference.

He sifted through the bills, and found buried among them a postcard in writing he did not recognize, which proved to be from Tom's girlfriend, Katya. She gave a lively account of Colin Lascelles's recovery on the cerise sofa; she requested the details of a book Rowland had recommended over lunch in Oxford, the title of which she had now forgotten, but which she felt was essential for her literature course. She sent love and best wishes, as did Tom, who was out, she wrote, playing in some university rugby match. The words 'rugby match' had been underlined in a scornful way; their inherent absurdity was emphasized by an exclamation mark.

Rowland looked at this missive for some while. Much pursued by females, he had learned over the years to be wary of all communications from women, even those - especially those - that appeared innocent. He frowned. On a postcard, he wrote the name of the book, its author and publisher. He added, 'Best wishes to you both', signed and addressed it, then gathered it up with the rest of the mail to be posted.

He looked at the work he had brought home with him, then, discovering it could wait, poured himself a whisky. He put more wood on the fire, and in a thoughtful way examined the black and white mountain photographs Lindsay had referred to, which he could remember her inspecting the first time she came here.

The photographs, attached to a pin board, were the sparsely furnished room's only personal element, apart from its many books. Beneath them were notes Rowland had made which detailed previous climbs of these

particular peaks, routes used, weather conditions and so on. Little tongues of firelight moved across these notes, and he recalled Lindsay's complaints about the jargon used here, with its terms – arêtes, corries – which she could not understand.

'It's a foreign language, Rowland,' she had said. 'You'll have to translate.'

'On reaching the Three Sisters north face overhang,' he read now, 'a traverse is needed across the buttress to reach the flake where the wall meets the overhang. The flake is positive; there is a small crack for the right foot, but the left has to smear. Behind the flake, just room for a Number Three Friend, and this can be backed up by a Number Five Rock Placement in the offset crack in the roof. Note, this placement is marginal after rain. Only a dyno can get you to the one substantial hold under the roof, but the swing out on gripping is nasty: 35 metres drop . . .'

Rowland read on, and as he did so, these words opened out the mountains to him; he saw, simultaneously, their immensity and the minute details of the cracks and crevices which made ascent possible. He considered that route and the sense of triumph he had felt on completing it. He considered, in particular, the use of a 'dyno', or dynamic movement, as referred to here. In essence, when effecting a dyno, a climber leaped – and although, to a watcher, that move might appear one of fluidity and acrobatic ease, it was dangerous. There was a moment, the tiniest of moments, when the climber moved through air, up and across the rock-face, springing towards the smallest projection or indentation in the rock, over which, or in which, his fingers could obtain enough purchase to support his body weight. The manoeuvre required nerve and physical strength; it required route knowledge and experience and a very precise degree of judgement. If mistimed, or ill-executed, the climber fell – in which case, his safety

depended on the skill and care with which he had secured his protection ropes.

Rowland considered this manoeuvre, and the crux of this route. Coming to a sudden decision, he picked up the telephone and again called Lindsay.

This time, she answered almost immediately. Hearing her familiar voice, Rowland felt less sure of his reason for calling.

'You've been engaged,' he said.

'Yes, I know.' Lindsay, as she often did, sounded breathless and jittery. 'I – someone from the States was calling me. I'm packing for New York. Why do I pack so badly, Rowland? There's clothes all over the bed and the floor. I can't decide what to take.'

'Take that red dress,' Rowland said, after a pause. 'I like that.'

'Really? It's a bit . . . Are you sure? I suppose it would do for parties.'

'Will you be going to many parties?'

'I might. Yes, probably. But I've lost the knack for parties, Rowland.'

'I suspect I never had it.'

There was a silence, during which Rowland watched a red-dressed Lindsay move across some New York party space. In his mind's eye, he saw her do this very clearly – and she was not unaccompanied.

'I had a postcard from Katya,' he said, with some difficulty, and with detectable awkwardness. 'She wanted the details of some book I mentioned. I gather my friend Colin recovered.' He paused. 'I gather he did at least call you to apologize . . .'

'Oh, yes, he did. That Sunday morning, after you left. He rang first thing – he is *nice*, Rowland. He sent me this bouquet of flowers; it was so beautiful. Roses and lilies and things. It was huge; it used up all my vases. I'm in my bedroom, and it looks like a bower . . .'

Rowland frowned.

'Also those clothes,' Lindsay said, still breathlessly, 'so it looks like a bower *and* a bomb site. Oh, I've just seen a rocket. They're having a firework party next door. There's this enormous bonfire. It's like a war zone here, explosions, fire-crackers going off. Can you hear fireworks, Rowland?'

Rowland listened. He realized that all evening, the other side of some barrier in his mind, he had been hearing muffled explosions, the whine as rockets took off.

'Yes, I can. Just. The shutters are closed though and that blocks out the sound.'

'I love those shutters. Is the fire lit?'

'Of course. Otherwise I'd freeze. Lindsay—'

'How nice.' Lindsay gave a breathless sigh. 'Are you working? Have you had a horrible week?'

'Fairly horrible. It's easing up. I should be working and I'm not; I couldn't concentrate for some reason. I – I just rang to wish you a safe journey . . .'

'Thank you. I'll give your regards to Broadway, Rowland . . .'

'I'd like that.' He paused. 'Give my regards to Colin as well. I haven't set eyes on him since lunch in Oxford.'

'Colin?'

'Well, Katya mentioned that he was about to go off to New York. I'm sure he'll look you up there . . .'

'Oh, he said something about that. He's having meetings with the evil genius, I think, and he's going to be staying somewhere odd – I remember, with some American aunt. Some batty ancient aunt.'

'That'll be his Great-Aunt Emily. She is ancient, but not batty; quite the reverse.'

'Well, I don't expect I will see him, Rowland. Or the aunt. I'll be rushing about . . .'

'Lindsay—'

'Going into ecstasies about dresses and hats. I'm quoting you now, Rowland. You said that once,

'Wrong yet again. You may be thinking about Colin; I'm not.'

'There's no need to sound so irritable, and I definitely know what you're thinking now. You're thinking, why doesn't this damn woman get off the phone? She's a pest.'

'Utterly wrong. I can give you my word – I've never thought that in my life, not once.'

Rowland spoke with great firmness. There was a silence, then, in answer, a sharp intake of breath; a strange moaning sound came down the line; this was followed by Lindsay, explaining she was moaning in despair. She still had so much packing to do; it was late; she had to be out at the airport at dawn. Rowland interrupted these excuses.

'Where are you staying in New York?' he said.

'The Pierre. I'm staying at the Pierre.'

'Maybe I should call you at the Pierre sometime. You could tell me what I was thinking. We could see if your intuition improves. Then—'

'Then?'

'Then you could call me – when you get back. You could call me when you get back from the airport, after you've closed the door, before you've removed your coat. Is that agreed?'

'All right. Agreed.'

There was a silence; a long silence. Lindsay made a coughing sound, then cleared her throat.

'Why?' she croaked.

Rowland considered. He thought of a call made to Yorkshire, which he had missed. He thought of Colin's remarks to him when describing that call. He hesitated. 'I shall have missed you, Lindsay,' he replied quietly, 'and it's always good to hear your voice.'

Had she said goodbye? Lindsay, replacing the receiver, was not at all sure. Possibly; she could not recall,

because the room was suddenly bright and the whole conversation was whirling about in her head. Its words would not lie still, nor assemble themselves in the correct order. The room was fizzing with words, and the undersides of words, and the spaces between words. The words were protean – they might have meant *that*, and they might have meant *this*.

She began to roam about the room making odd, inarticulate sounds. She clasped and unclasped her hands and stared unseeingly at the chaos around her. Dresses and blouses, trousers, skirts and snaking tights; sentences that led in one direction and then doubled back. She prayed hard and silently not to hope, because hoping was the most painful emotion of all and the one she was most determined to cure. She pinched herself and read herself more of the usual silent lectures, because she knew she had been here before, in this stupid demented state, and she had learned, again and again, just how deluded it was.

Affection was not love, and she had to learn to distinguish the two in Rowland's voice. It was pathetic, pathetic, that a man's voice could produce this effect. Had she been twenty, there might have been some excuse, but she was not twenty, and something was badly wrong with her. Somewhere and somehow the past decades had never happened and she had failed to grow up.

No – she could not accept that. If to outgrow love was to grow up, then she would have none of it; she would be content to remain foolish and immature until the date of her death. So no, she would not denounce or renounce the need or the desire, but she would cure herself of imagining a response where it did not exist. She must stop her own emotions spilling over, so that the words she could not say overflowed into his, and her imagination rewrote Rowland's scripts. On the other hand – and here she felt again an irrepressible delight

— Rowland had liked her red dress; he had said, with great firmness, that he liked, no, that it was *good* to hear her voice. He did intend to call her in America; he wanted her to call him, the instant, the very instant, she got back. And this request, Lindsay found, had a soaring resonance; its wings beat about her heart and her head. Such a glorious night, this, she thought, dancing across to the window and gazing out. There was a moon, a full, high, powerful, pregnant moon, and instead of stars, which the lights of London blocked out, there was the lovely artifice of rocket star-trails, showering gold on wintry gardens, and exploding over the shine of slate roofs.

She had been talking to Gini in Washington, earlier, when Rowland had been trying to reach her. Now, watching these streaking stars and listening to these thunderclaps, it was clear to her that she must, at once, call her friend back.

No sooner thought than done. She dialled Gini's number and spoke with a sparkling precision; she rearranged all the plans they had made less than an hour earlier, and, having done so, hung up and began to repack. Such a transformation: now, she found, the clothes folded themselves into suitcases and lay obligingly flat, shoes tucked themselves cunningly in corners; instead of bulging and protesting and refusing to shut, as the cases usually did, they closed with ease — one touch of the fingers and the locks snapped shut. One last case remained. Inside it, Lindsay prepared a nest of tissue-paper; she danced across to the closet, and on this nest, interleaved with more tissue, she folded her newly beloved red dress.

In Washington, meanwhile, in her dead father's house, Gini had replaced the telephone receiver, and — looking at her husband and half-sleeping baby son — was shaking her head.

'That was Lindsay again, and she sounded completely mad,' she said.

'Lindsay? But you'd only just spoken to her.'

'I know, and she sounded fine then. Now, I couldn't make out half of what she was saying. It's Bonfire Night in England; I could hear fireworks in the background. She was scrambling up all her sentences and she was out of breath; she sounded as if she'd just run a marathon . . . no, panic-stricken. She sounded panic-stricken, as if she'd just been attacked.'

Her husband smiled. He moved across to the windows and looked out at the quiet, charming, brick-paved Georgetown street. He adjusted Lucien's weight in his arms so he was more secure and kissed his brow.

'Oh, you know Lindsay,' he said carelessly, 'she often sounds as if she's run halfway up the Empire State building. Lucien's sleepy - I'm going to take him out in a minute. What did she want anyway?'

'She wanted to cancel her Thanksgiving visit here, I think. Half an hour earlier, we had everything planned. Now she says she may have to rush straight back to London . . .'

'How odd. Did she say why?'

'No, not really. Some garbled excuse.' She gave a small frown and glanced at Pascal. 'I think there's some man at the back of it. She's been quite strange for months . . .'

'Well, I hope there is,' Pascal replied. 'I like Lindsay; she deserves to be happy . . .'

'A man doesn't necessarily provide happiness, you know,' Gini said, a little sharply, turning away. 'Lindsay's lived alone for years. She's perfectly happy as she is.'

There was a small silence. Pascal looked at his wife thoughtfully; she had moved away to the dining-table which she had been using as a desk. It was piled with folders and files, most of them containing the paperwork

attendant on her father's death. This room, like most of the house, was in the process of being dismantled prior to its sale. There were faded patches of wall-paper where pictures had once hung and one wall was lined with packing-cases. He had never liked Gini's father and he had found these necessary weeks in his former home difficult. This, he knew, was even more true for Gini, and he was prepared to make allowances because of that.

'She might not wish to continue living alone,' he said, in a mild way. 'She might even wish to marry again, and marriage can bring happiness, don't you think?'

His wife coloured. 'Of course. I didn't mean that. It's just - Lindsay has no judgement whatsoever where men are concerned . . .'

'I wouldn't say that. Who is this unsuitable man she's interested in?'

'Oh, I don't know. Someone she works with, I think. Pascal, I don't have *time* for this. I have to check through this stupid Natasha Lawrence article I've written and fax it off to her and I just *know* she's going to start raising objections. I wish I'd never said I'd do it. I hate showbiz profiles; this is the last one I'll ever do . . .'

Her husband, watching her change the subject in this way, thought he knew the reason. He hesitated, wondering if he could bring himself to mention Rowland McGuire's name, with all its attendant risks. He decided not to do so, although he now felt certain that McGuire was the unnamed man concerned, for he had heard jealousy in his wife's voice - or possessiveness, perhaps.

Could you be possessive about a man you no longer cared for? A man you had not seen in three years? He doubted it; but then his wife did not relinquish her hold on others easily, even after they had ceased to be part of her life. But there were reasons for that - her relationship with her father above all. It had not been easy for her, he thought, as she bent her fair head over

her papers, to come here to her father's house and discover the degree to which he had eradicated her from his life. So far, they had not found the least hint of her existence – not one photograph, none of the letters she had written him, none of the newspaper articles she had written and religiously sent to him. The thanklessness and cruelty of this angered Pascal; with the death of her father, he had believed that Gini might at last break free of his influence. A sojourn here in this house had shown him that death made no difference; for many more years, he feared, his wife would be haunted by her father's indifference and neglect.

Moving across to her now, he drew her against him and kissed her pale hair.

'Send the article off, darling,' he said, 'then come out with Lucien and me. It would do you good to walk, to get some fresh air. You've been working so hard: clearing up this place, writing a thousand letters to lawyers and banks. Come out with us – the sun's shining; it's a beautiful day . . .'

'No, I won't – I'd like to, Pascal, you know I would, but I need to check this through before I send it. There are some letters I have to write. If Lindsay *isn't* coming for Thanksgiving, I suppose we could leave here a little sooner . . .'

'We could.' He hesitated. 'And that might be a much better plan anyway, darling. It was never going to be easy, having her here – the place is in chaos. I know you were very set on it, but we can't delay for ever. You'll feel better once you're out of this house. We could go to friends for Thanksgiving, then we could start work on our book . . .'

'I suppose so.' She moved away from him. 'You go, Pascal; I'll come with you tomorrow. But I must get on with this.'

'Do you want me to read your piece before I go?'

'No, I hate it. It's adequate at best. I got nothing out

of her. You know the only interesting fact in here?' She gestured at the printout of her article. 'It took fifty-five takes to shoot that spider sequence in *Dead Heat* – and Natasha Lawrence is terrified of spiders, or so she said. I thought that was revealing. That sequence is one of the vilest things I've ever seen on film. Why would that ex-husband of hers put her through that fifty-five times? He's a sadist, I think.'

'I doubt that.' Pascal smiled. 'That sequence is very complex from a technical point of view, Gini. There's those mirrors; there's that three hundred and sixty degree pan. I've seen it three times; I work with cameras and I still don't know how he did it . . .' He paused. 'You're sure you won't come with us? No? Then we'll see you in about an hour . . .'

He went out. With a sigh, Gini sat down at the table; she moved papers and files in a desultory way, back and forth. She glanced over her shoulder, because when the house was quiet, she could never rid herself of the sensation that at any moment the door would open and her father would come in and ask her what right she had to be here, in his house.

She had no right – she felt that. In front of her now were all the files and papers which confirmed her daughterly role: the letters from lawyers and real-estate agents; the letters from the IRS, from brokers, from banks. To these correspondents, she possessed the authority of daughter, executor and sole heir, as certified by a brief cold will made some twelve years before and never revised: 'I hereby give and bequeath to my only child, Genevieve Hunter.' Only her father, she thought, could contrive to leave her everything, yet make her feel disinherited. And she saw him again, as he had been in the last week of his illness, when he realized he was dying, and that the years of alcoholism had finally caught up with him. It had been the day before they put him on a morphine pump and he lapsed into

unconsciousness. She had been sitting there, holding his hand, until she had realized that, for some while, he had been struggling to free himself.

'Just for Christ's sake let *go* of me,' he had said. 'And for the love of God, go somewhere *else*.'

She knew, with a dull and painful certainty, that those words, spoken with a bitter amusement very characteristic of him, would remain with her for the rest of her life.

Pascal was right, she thought; she had to escape from this house – and the sooner she did it, the better.

She picked up the *New York Times* interview she had written, together with its covering letter, and fed it into her fax machine; she had asked Natasha Lawrence to reply by the end of the following day and to restrict any queries she might have to facts, but she felt no great optimism that the actress would listen to either request.

She glanced towards the windows and the quiet, empty street beyond, hesitated, and then drew towards her the file of condolence letters. Only half of these had been answered, although she had set aside an hour each morning for the task. Here were all the gentle fictions from her father's past friends, erstwhile editors and colleagues. They wrote kindly and with ingenuity, avoiding the issue of his drunken, wilderness years; she answered with similar evasions and reticence.

Pushing aside the top-most letters in the file, all of which Pascal had seen, she drew out the one letter she had *not* shown him, the letter received almost a month before, from Rowland McGuire.

The letter was brief, handwritten, and formal in tone. 'I was sorry to hear the news of . . .' Rowland wrote in black ink, on white paper, his handwriting firm and clear. The phrases he used were those of a polite acquaintance, observing the formalities, yet she could not hold the letter in her hand without remembering their brief affair. His letter brought him back – the

strokes of his pen made her see his face and hear his voice; worse still, they made her remember a particular expression in his eyes, at a particular time. Closing her eyes now, she let herself watch an act impetuously and urgently begun, then repeated throughout a long night. She allowed herself to remember and, to her shame, she felt a brief pulse of physical longing for him, a faint echoing in her body of past sexual excitement and desire.

This had never happened to her before. With a low exclamation of anger and distress, she rose from her chair and began to pace the room. A car passed in the street beyond; the air in the room suddenly felt thick with a choking despondency. Too many ghosts, she thought, and this house was to blame. She met her childhood self in the dark at the turn of the stairs; the past spilled out of these packing-cases; uncertainty was disgorged from these files.

She moved towards the door, then stopped, catching sight of herself in a dusty mirror which had not yet been packed away. There, behind the veiling of dust and mercury scars on the glass, she saw herself – a pale woman, with pale hair and a striving expression. Looming over her, she realized that this woman, with her vacillating gaze, had lost the first bloom of youth. Visibly in her thirties, and would soon look middle-aged.

Wife. Mother. She mouthed these words at her reflection. She thought of her son, whom she loved with the greatest intensity, and of Pascal, a gentler, more human now than he had once been. Fatherhood bore him – but she was afraid sometimes, although he would not poke of it, that he regretted the decision to go to photographing wars.

It was the right decision, she told her own reflection. His work had contributed to the break-up of his marriage, and photographing wars as Pascal did was dangerous; it was not a suitable occupation now that

was the father of her child. She looked in the mirror uncertainly, but her face did not reproach her for a decision she knew was influenced by her. 'The *right* thing to do,' she said, turning away from the mirror. She sat down again at the table, and quickly, before she could change her mind, wrote a brief answer to Rowland McGuire.

Rowland wrote formally: she found she could master this language equally well. A sentence of thanks for his letter; a sentence for her father and the funeral; a brief mention of the planned book; a final sentence for herself, Lucien and Pascal. She ended the letter 'Yours sincerely', as he had done. She was about to fold it into its envelope when the fax machine rang, then whirled. She had been concentrating on her task so deeply that the sound made her jump; she swung around, as if someone unseen had just crept up behind her and touched her arm.

To her surprise, she saw that Natasha Lawrence was already replying. A brief handwritten note from the actress was scrolling out from the machine. She thanked Gini for an interesting interview, complimented her on her understanding of the acting process, and assured her that she had no objections to raise.

This letter made Gini unaccountably uneasy. It was too complimentary; it was oversweet and artificial in tone. The lady doth protest too much, she thought, and wondered why.

Tossing it to one side, she picked up her own letter to Rowland McGuire. On second reading, its tone seemed less unequivocal than she had intended. She would rewrite it tomorrow, she decided, and glancing up, she saw that Pascal and Lucien were returning from their walk. Pascal was laughing and lifting Lucien up; his son, who resembled him so strongly, with the same dark hair and the same grey eyes, was also laughing and chattering away in his touching approximation to

language, a tongue composed of recognizable words and invented ones of his own.

She saw them as if in a photograph, a shutter clicking and freezing this moment in time. As they were then, she would always remember them, she thought; in this she was correct. She would also remember her own immediate response, which was to hide Rowland McGuire's letter, and her reply to it, at the bottom of that condolence file.

In New York, at the Carlyle, Tomas Court watched his wife return to the sitting-room with the faxed *New York Times* interview in her hand. He had arrived here only a short while before, and the atmosphere in the room felt edgy and duplicitous, although he could not have said why.

He was sitting in front of the television set and talking on the telephone to Colin Lascelles in London; as he spoke and listened, he flipped the video controls, and on the TV screen a perfect Wildfell Hall fast-forwarded, rewound, paused. He examined a louring doorway, dark ranked windows, a crumbling façade; he surveyed moorland, then tracked down to a deserted horseshoe-shaped beach, while in his ear, Lascelles's very English voice continued to explain the security arrangements his assistants were making at various English location hotels. Behind and through his words came the pop, thunder and fizz of mysterious explosions. Court covered the mouthpiece with his hand.

'You've passed that article?'

He glanced across at his wife. She nodded, then, as he snapped his fingers at her, handed the pages across.

'You can't watch, listen *and* read, Tomas,' she said, in a mild tone.

'You're wrong, I can.'

She gave a small shrug, then crossed to her son, who was waiting in the doorway with a stout, well

wrapped-up Angelica. Natasha adjusted his scarf and zipped up his scarlet anorak. Jonathan and Angelica, together with some new, recently hired bodyguard nicknamed Tex, were about to make an expedition to feed the zoo animals in Central Park.

Apparently, they did this every Wednesday; *apparently*, the new bodyguard was a great favourite with everyone, especially Jonathan; *apparently*, no-one had expected Tomas Court until later, and Jonathan would be disappointed if this expedition were postponed. *Apparently*, in the month since his father had last seen him, Jonathan had become obsessed with animals, birds, bats, reptiles and insects, books on which now surrounded Court on all sides. Court looked at the *Times* article and the books somewhat sourly. It seemed to him that *apparently* Jonathan had grown used to being mollycoddled by his mother and all the other attendant women who came and went here; Jonathan was *apparently* in danger of being spoiled.

'For God's sake,' he said, 'leave the boy alone, Natasha. He's going to Central Park, not the North Pole.'

The response, as he could have predicted, was a female closing of ranks, a shushing and scurrying, a furtive maternal embrace. Angelica turned her back on Court; Jonathan was hustled out; the door closed.

Colin Lascelles, Court thought, with a certain dour amusement, returning his attention to the telephone, was now sounding more confident than he had in weeks. The particular game Court had played with him, a game often employed before, had proved effective. Court had wanted to see if Lascelles buckled under pressure, and had he done so, would have discarded him. Lascelles had *not* buckled, and he had finally found a house that was everything Court desired, the Wildfell Hall of his imagination, that place of exile and retreat which, for

nearly two years now, had occupied his thoughts and appeared to him in dreams.

One day, he thought, he would perhaps tell Colin Lascelles why he had hired him – a decision he had reached during their first meeting in that Prague hotel room when Lascelles, vulnerable, voluble and ill at ease, had told him that story about a woman once encountered on a Qantas flight, a story Court had found touching and absurd.

Lascelles probably imagined, he thought, listening to him, that he had been hired for his professional abilities, which were considerable; and indeed, those abilities had weighed with Court, obviously so. Before even speaking to Lascelles, he had viewed every major movie on which he had worked and talked to numerous directors who knew him. He had acquainted himself with every detail of Lascelles's background: his family, his privileged schooling and his training.

He had known that Lascelles was the heir to a large estate in England, and had been since the death of his elder brother. He further discovered that at the age of eight, and on the death of his American mother, he had inherited a fortune from her family, the Lancaster clan. That fortune had been held in trust for him, but from the age of twenty-one Lascelles had been a very rich man, one who need never have worked again. He *had* worked, however, and worked hard. That fact interested Court, whose own background was poor.

Court, meeting Colin Lascelles for the first time, had discovered that he resolutely avoided all mention of this background; he let not one single detail slip regarding his parentage, his wealth, his privileged schooling, or his celebrated home, Shute Court, where his family had lived for over 400 years. Court found that he liked this somewhat innocent and engaging man. He could see that Lascelles was trying to perfect the classless argot of the international movie world, and that he was not

altogether succeeding. He noticed – such details always interested him – that Lascelles had the English gift of appearing elegant and shabby at once. He noticed too that the camouflage of the clothes was imperfect: Lascelles might be wearing jeans and a shirt with fraying cuffs, but the discreet watch half hidden by those cuffs was a Patek Philipe, and the shoes were handmade.

‘I first saw her at the Qantas check-in,’ Lascelles had been saying. ‘I wasn’t in very good shape. I had a hangover. It was the anniversary of – well, of my brother’s death, actually. I managed to get my seat changed, so I could sit next to her, then I saw she was wearing a wedding ring, so I never said a word. I just sat there and looked at her for twelve thousand miles . . .’ He had paused. ‘So when I read your script . . . I can understand that *hope*. I think everyone secretly believes that one day they’ll meet the – well, the right person. Only no-one ever admits it these days . . .’

And then, right then, Tomas Court had decided to hire him – not, ultimately, for his professional abilities, considerable though these were, but because he saw that this troubled, inarticulate Englishman might understand obsession. The discovery had surprised Court, who believed all Englishmen to be cold-blooded, particularly Englishmen of Lascelles’s class.

Court looked across at his wife, whom he had been carefully ignoring. ‘Checking the fire-escape situation,’ he heard Lascelles say now. Again, he placed his hand over the mouthpiece. He flicked the faxed pages of the *Times* article, written by some woman journalist called Genevieve Hunter, of whom he had never heard.

‘Why did you pass this? You scarcely read it, Natasha.’ His wife, back to the door, looked at him uncertainly.

‘It’s only short, Tomas. It’s fine. I was careful; I had to be. She’d been talking to someone and she mentioned the Conrad building.’

‘She doesn’t mention it here.’ He gave a gesture of

annoyance. 'And it wouldn't have mattered if she had, since you're not going to live there.'

'You may have decided that, Tomas; I haven't. And I'm not going to have that argument again.'

'Fine. Drop the subject.'

'I was alarmed when she mentioned the Conrad, Tomas – obviously. People will gossip. Word gets out. And I have to be so careful . . .' She hesitated. Her voice, which had sharpened a moment before and taken on that tense obstinate note he most disliked, now softened and became conciliatory.

'Anyway, Tomas, you'd have been proud of me. I told her I'd bought a house in the Hollywood hills. I made up all this rigmarole about it on the spur of the moment – and she bought it. She mentions that plan, and I knew she would. Journalists always love it when they think they've prised some new information out of you.' She gave a half smile. 'So you see, I can lie quite well, Tomas, when I have to . . .'

That reply did not appear to please her husband, whom she could never think of as her ex-husband. He scanned the pages, then tossed them aside.

'Maybe. You lie better when I'm scripting you.'

'Do I?'

'Yes, but you're right, the article's fine. She didn't get close; a million miles wide. Look.' He flicked the video controls again. 'Here's your Wildfell Hall.'

His wife, and Court knew he would never be able to think of her as his ex-wife, moved slowly forwards a few paces and looked at the screen. She examined the stern, gabled façade, the moorland, then the track, the cliffs, and the horseshoe-shaped beach below.

'Yes,' she said, on a slow exhalation of breath. 'Yes. Except – the house isn't that close to the sea in the novel.'

'We're not filming the novel; we're filming *my* script from the novel. I need the sea; it's better that way.'

'Maybe so. Maybe so.'

She retreated again a few paces and stood looking at him quietly, her long pale hands clasped at the waist of the grey dress she was wearing.

Quiet as a nun, her husband thought, and with a sense of anger realized that it was a double quotation, from a poem by Milton in the first place, from the taped telephone calls of their persecutor in the second. He thought: the *Collected Works of Milton*; the *Collected Works of Joseph King*. Did the use of such quotations mean that King, who had a flat Midwestern accent, a somewhat mordant sense of humour, and an undoubted gift for language, was an educated man?

King could be lyrical, also crude. The police might choose to categorize him as yet another weirdo, as wacko, as some sleazeball or screwball; Court did not agree. King was subtle and certainly intelligent; his phrases stuck in the mind. In one recorded call, he had described, for instance, this grey dress Natasha was wearing. Natasha, who had been protected from some of King's calls, was not aware of that fact, but King had described the dress, its soft cashmere, the way her body shaped the material, very well.

Something small, fiery and malevolent began to stir deep in the recesses of Court's mind. In his ear, Colin Lascelles had continued to speak all this while. He was explaining that they needed to discuss weather cover, and that he would be arriving in New York the next day, in the morning; he had switched to an earlier plane.

'Come to TriBeCa,' Court said. 'I have a loft in TriBeCa. You've got that address? Come there.'

Lascelles agreed and reverted to the question of security. Court's requirements, he said, had astonished the various hotel managements. They had emphasized that Yorkshire was not like New York or Los Angeles,

and that the crime rate was low. Why, so secure did their guests feel, even their American guests, that they often did not bother to lock their doors . . .

'You've tied your hair back.' Court covered the mouthpiece once more. 'I hate it that way. Undo it . . .'

'Now? Tomas—'

'Undo it. I've been away a month. It's not much to ask.' He could see, almost smell, her reluctance. She hesitated, glanced towards the door, then lifted her arms. Her long hair was tied back with a black grosgrain ribbon. Slowly, she untied it and began to wind it around her hand. Blood mounted in her neck, then suffused her face. She lowered her eyes.

'Tomas - Jonathan will be back soon. They'll all be back . . .'

'This new bodyguard - how old is he?'

'Tex? I don't know - young. Twenty-five, twenty-six. He's been protecting some oil billionaire. The agency said—'

'Good-looking?'

'Tomas, what does that matter? He does his job—'

'Is he good-looking?'

'I guess so. He's tall, blond. A country boy. He has a fiancée, Tomas, back home in some little town near Fort Worth. You'll like him—'

'Maybe.'

'Tomas, please - can't you get off the phone? I wanted to talk to you . . .'

'What about?'

He looked at her steadily; Lascelles's words, punctuated by those explosions, now blurred. He waited, knowing the answer, feeling amid the stirrings of an irrational anger, the stirring of a familiar desire.

'About that newspaper clipping you sent me. That man they found in Glacier Park. About what the police told you, and the detective agency. You said . . . You said they had checks to complete, and - I have to know

– is he really dead, Tomas? Was it Joseph King they found?’

‘New locks,’ Colin Lascelles said, into Court’s ear, ‘and an adjoining room for the bodyguard. Now—’

Behind his words came the soft thud of another explosion; some atavistic British festival, Court thought; the burning of a traitor in effigy. He sniffed; the air in the hotel suite, purified, humidified, smelt acrid.

‘We’ll discuss it tomorrow,’ Court said. ‘I have to go now.’

He replaced the receiver and looked long and hard at his wife.

The thick, long, dark weight of her hair had now fallen forward; one strand, coiled like a question mark, rested against the roundness of her left breast. Beneath that breast, invisible to all but a lover, his wife had a small mole, a velvety aberration of the skin which he cherished. In his movies, he had always rendered this alluring defect invisible. He hid it religiously with make-up, with lighting, with camera angles, for it was *his* mole, part of his secret knowledge of her. That mole, in some detail, and with relish, King had described. He looked at his wife levelly; King’s knowledge, of which his wife remained ignorant, could have only one possible explanation. Yet that explanation was *impossible*, since his wife recognized neither King’s voice, nor his writing – or so she had told Court many, many times.

‘Do you want him dead?’ he said, his tone cold.

‘Tomas, please.’ She gave a helpless gesture of the hands. ‘How can you ask that? You know I do. I prayed he’d die; and if that’s wicked, I don’t care.’

‘Their enquiries are inconclusive.’ He kept his eyes on her. ‘They need more time . . .’

‘Why? *Why?*’ The colour had now ebbed from her face, and her skin was ashen.

‘They just do, that’s all. It’s complicated.’ He paused, and for a second he could hear King’s voice, mocking,

knowledgeable. Just a fragment from one of the many, many tapes of his calls; the words used were effective – Court could feel the kick and pulse of them in his groin.

Still looking levelly at his wife, he held out his hand to her. She began on excuses at once: there wasn't time, it was too soon, Jonathan would be returning, she would have to leave for the theatre, she needed to talk, just talk . . .

Court scarcely heard her words behind some crackle and hiss in his mind, a sound that could have come from a defective tape, or from a fire.

'Come here,' he said, in the tone which always guaranteed she would obey him. Still she hung back, and he flexed his fingers. He listened to the thud in his blood, the bang of his heart.

'It's been a *month*,' he said. 'A *month*. Trust me. Come here.'

FRIDAY THE THIRTEENTH

VIII

'On the beach,' Tomas Court said.

'But . . . ' said Colin Lascelles.

'But . . . ' said Mario Schwartz, Court's first assistant director.

Mario and Colin glanced at each other; both were keeping count and so far Colin was winning. He was averaging twenty 'buts' an hour; Mario, limping behind, was averaging fifteen.

'Fucking *hell* . . . ' said the neat, grey-haired, bespectacled woman who was sitting next to Court and recording these proceedings in microscopic script. Her name was Thalia Ng; she was one of Court's oldest associates, a woman resembling some mouse of a librarian. One week into his protracted meetings with Tomas Court, Colin was still adjusting to her habitual mode of speech – it clashed with her woolly cardigans.

'On the *beach*,' Court repeated, ignoring these interruptions. 'When Gilbert Markham sees Helen for the first time, he has to see her on the beach.'

'Why?' said Thalia Ng.

'Because I say so,' Court replied, with charm.

'Personally,' Thalia Ng replied, in cosy tones, 'I think Gilbert Markham is a prick, and Helen is one tight-assed bitch. *Personally*, I don't give a flying fuck *where* they meet, but . . . '

The eyes of Mario and Colin locked; Thalia Ng's score was ten and rising.

'They don't *meet*,' Tomas Court fixed her with a cool glance. 'I said he *sees* her. She's down by the sea; he's

up on the cliffs. He *watches* her. She's only just arrived in the neighbourhood and he doesn't yet know who she is. In case you haven't noticed, Thalia, there's a lot of voyeurism in this book . . .'

'Sure, and there's a whole lot more in your script. And OK, I can live with that, but you've now changed your mind four times. *Four times*, Tomas. First, they're meeting on the moors, and I think, Oh shit, been here before – it's 1939, it's Sam Goldwyn's *Wuthering Heights*. I mean, *please*, it's Merle fucking Oberon and . . .'

'Larry fucking Olivier,' Court interjected politely. 'Precisely, Thalia.'

'Then,' Thalia Ng continued. '*Then*, like major re-think, they meet in Gilbert Markham's house, the same way they do in the novel – big *yawn*. Then – I'm on idea number three now, Tomas, I'm keeping track of this horse shit – then, it's night, and Helen's inside Wildfell Hall, and this jerk Markham is creeping around in the garden, trying to get a first look at her, and I'm thinking: *Rear Window*? *Peeping Tom*, perhaps? Now it's moved *again*. She's on the fucking *beach*. That beach is giving me problems, Tomas. That beach is saying *French Lieutenant's Woman*, a colostomy bag of a movie. So perhaps you'd tell me, before you comprehensively gang-bang the schedules yet again, are you *serious*? Are you *sure* about this?'

Tomas Court gave a small tight smile. Colin could not decide if he was annoyed or delighted by Thalia Ng's comments. The suspicion was growing in Colin's mind that these arguments between Thalia and Court were a little double act they both enjoyed. He suspected they were rehearsed; he suspected that, right from the first, Court had intended this scene to take place on the beach, and that Thalia knew that. Quite why Court should want to play Prospero in this way, Colin could not decide; all he knew, as the long day wore on, was that Thalia was an unlikely Ariel, and he seemed

destined to play Caliban, Prospero's deformed and discontented slave.

This role was familiar to Colin, since he had once actually played it, aged fourteen, at an end-of-term culture-fest at his public school. He had given a vigorous and, it was widely agreed, triumphant performance, leaping about grunting like a chimpanzee, with a fish in his mouth in the drunk scenes. Even his father, not known for his interest in or respect for theatre, had enjoyed the evening. He had motored up from Shute in his ancient silver Rolls Royce, and sat in the front row, moustache bristling, laughing loudly and slapping his thigh every time he considered Caliban had made a joke.

'By Jove, he's got something, that Shakespeare johnny,' he said to Colin afterwards. 'Bloody fine costumes too. Who was in charge of costumes?'

'Matron,' Colin said.

'Who was that playing Prospero?'

'Hicks-Henderson major, sir. I hate him.'

'Don't blame you. Can't act for toffee. Complete and utter berk.'

Compliments on his own definitive playing of Caliban had followed. Now, Colin drifted off and away to the islands of nostalgia, to a land of lost content where his brother was still alive and all was well. 'Be not afeard'; he heard his own reedy fourteen-year-old voice pronounce. 'Be not afeard; the isle is full of noises, sounds and sweet airs, that give delight and hurt not . . .' His head began a slow descent towards the table; sleep gathered him gently in its arms, then Mario Schwartz stuck an elbow in his ribs.

Colin jerked upright, trying to radiate alertness.

'But . . .' he said.

Mario noted this addition to his score; no-one else took the least notice.

'Those schedules are provisional, Thalia,' Court was saying, 'so just stop arguing, and fix it - all right?'

Thalia Ng gave a small enigmatic sigh, and wrote a note in microscopic script. Court stretched and flexed his fingers.

'Right. Let's move on. Scene eight,' he said. Colin waited until the director was well into the depredations he intended for scene eight. He wondered how long he could decently wait before interjecting another 'but', and whether, in any case, he had the energy. When he was certain Prospero was not looking his way, he rested his wrist on the edge of the table, then, very, very discreetly, eased the cuff back against the edge, so that he could look at his watch.

It was now nearly six in the evening. He had been sitting at this long black table, in Court's TriBeCa loft, since eight o'clock that morning. The previous meetings with Court had been bad, but this was undoubtedly the worst. It began with the news that, after protracted wranglings, Nic Hicks had finally signed to play Gilbert Markham. Nic Hicks, or Nic Prick as he preferred to call him, was the man Colin most loathed in the world. He recalled his meeting with him in that theatre bar; he contemplated the appalling prospect of spending the entire twelve-week shooting schedule in the closest daily proximity with this man: Nic Hicks, whose conceit was boundless, Nic Prick who had whinging down to a fine art.

He was just recovering from this blow, announced by Tomas Court with a small sly smile, he had noticed, when Thalia reported during a coffee break that Nic had been on the phone, would be arriving in New York shortly, and sent word that he and Colin must *get together very soon*. Colin had assumed that, if there were any justice in the world, this had to be the lowest point of the day; he was wrong. He was now frantic for a cigarette, exhausted, frustrated and confused.

On the table in front of him, next to the usual array of Court's asthma inhalers, were piles of different

coloured papers: pink, green, yellow, blue. These were the various schedule revises already made; buried somewhere beneath them, and now altered beyond recognition, was the immaculate location plan he had proudly brought with him from England. Buried somewhere else under this multicoloured litter was the original first draft shooting schedule he had helped to compile in those few heady days of optimism when he first arrived in New York.

This pristine, sensible document, its every detail overseen by Tomas Court, was now in the process of being unpicked, slashed, rent, trampled upon, patchworked and restitched. The alterations made by Court over the previous couple of days had been substantial; today, he had excelled himself. He had juggled locations, so far changing the settings of fifteen major scenes and ten minor ones. Thalia Ng's function, apart from abusing Court by rote, was to keep a record of these alterations, each one of which had a knock-on effect. Cast, crew, availability, transport, accommodation, costs – Colin watched a mile of dominoes topple down; he had long ago lost track of which scene was now happening where; he was starting to feel sick and dizzy, on the edge of some cliff, watching the seas of despair.

Visconti was worse, he told himself. Visconti, a genius, was a total megalomaniac; yet he had managed to work with Visconti. He had worked with a tetchy, ageing, punctilious David Lean, on a film never actually made. He had survived Lean, the quixotic Truffaut, that kung-fu Korean, the lunatic Pole, the deranged Australian, several certifiable Brits, and those two new-wave Germans who needed strait-jackets. *I can deal with this*, he told himself grimly; very few movie directors, in his experience, were men of sweet reason or of course he could deal with it. He would. *however deal with it a whole lot better if he could have a cigarette.*

'Excuse me a moment,' he said, rising to his feet.

Tomas Court went on talking; Thalia Ng tapped his arm.

'Colin wants the john.'

'Oh.' Court looked up, his expression preoccupied.

'Didn't Thalia show you earlier? The far end, turn right, first door on the left. Now, that scene you mentioned, Thalia, with Gilbert Markham in the garden at night - I want to keep that, but I'm moving it . . .'

A low groan escaped Colin's lips. He moved away from the table fast. He was supposed to be meeting lovely Lindsay Drummond at seven-thirty. He was taking her out to dinner; this prospect alone had kept him sane all day.

No problem, he thought, negotiating the long, bare, improvisatory loft area which comprised Court's main living and working space. The space offended Colin's educated eye: it was bleak and looked unloved; no effort had been made to furnish it; it looked as if Court had just moved in, or was about to move out. Colin avoided various stacks of cardboard boxes - there were piles of them everywhere. A *cigarette*, then he would feel revived and confident, he promised himself. He would return to the table and *contribute*, which would probably amaze everyone, since he had scarcely opened his mouth all day.

Then he would simply announce he was leaving - just like that. The rest of them could go on until midnight if they felt like it - and they probably did; he would be sitting at a quiet table in a quiet, civilized restaurant, eating wonderful food and *advising* Lindsay.

He had now been advising Lindsay, on and off, for the past week, whenever he could contrive a gap in his and her frantic schedules. At every opportunity, he had been prompting Lindsay on the subject of her prospective biography, her inadequate advance, her economic pressures, and her hope to relieve these by renting her London apartment and finding somewhere cheaper out

in the sticks. Whenever Lindsay attempted to change the subject, Colin gently led her back to it: he now knew a great deal about Gabrielle Chanel, and Lindsay's hoped-for hovel with the roses around the door.

The role of adviser to Lindsay was not, perhaps, the one he would have chosen, but he had to start somewhere, and he now felt he was perfecting the role. Quiet, concerned, wise, *prudent* – that was the line to take. Colin was aware he was somewhat miscast in this role – quietness did not come easily to him and prudence felt unnatural – but he was trying hard. Colin's experience of women, considerably more extensive than most women assumed on meeting him, told him that Lindsay needed careful handling. She was quite odd anyway (he liked her for this) and she appeared to be in some odd stressed-out state: it was very important, therefore, to take things slowly and not to rush.

Considering what a bad start they had made in Oxford, Colin felt he had a lot of territory to cover, but so far they were making progress, bowling happily along at a prudent speed: this evening, he had decided, was the moment to depress the throttle and accelerate.

He had reached a bare brick wall, a completely bare, brutal, black brick wall at the far end of the loft. Opening a door, Colin found himself in a dark narrow corridor. He turned right, as instructed, and felt about for a light switch. He found one, proceeded a few yards further on, as an ugly neon strip flickered above his head, then he stopped and gaped.

When, directed by Thalia earlier on, he had found his way to the bathroom here before, all the other doors in the corridor had been shut. Now, a door opposite the bathroom, a door which clearly led into Tomas Court's bedroom, was wide open. *Private. Out of Bounds*, pronounced the voice of Colin's rigorous upbringing, but it was already too late.

He had seen through into the bedroom beyond, which

was eerily lit by the bluish neon from the corridor, and by the street lights shining into the room through its wall of metal-framed windows. He could see that the room contained one very large, monstrous bed, draped with a dark cover the colour of dried blood. Next to the bed, on a wheeled table that had a surgical look, was a large old-fashioned recording machine, of the kind that took spools of tape, not cassettes; Colin had not seen such a machine in years. It was flanked by two towering black speakers and by a cliff, a precipice, a cascade, of audiotapes. Mounted behind the bed, blown up very large, so the photograph was the size of some Renaissance altarpiece, was the celebrated black and white still of Natasha Lawrence in *Dead Heat*. Colin stared, transfixed. It could not escape his notice that the image had been slashed – a huge jagged knife cut had been made at a diagonal angle, slicing through her body from the left shoulder, with its little crouching spider, to the pale delicate jut of her right hip.

‘Oh Christ,’ Colin muttered under his breath, and took a step back. It then occurred to him that perhaps Mario and Thalia had not seen this, that it might be better if they did *not* see it. Gingerly, he moved forward, intent on closing the door and concealing what he had seen. As soon as he moved into the doorway, a light lit – a small red light, mounted on some invisible piece of machinery high on the opposite wall, above the bed. Colin looked at it nervously; it was possible that the light was part of some security system, was similar to those body-heat detectors that his father, for instance, had recently installed in the Great Hall at Shute, at vast expense. On the other hand, given Tomas Court’s profession, or predilections, it could be a camera; he might now be being recorded on some closed-circuit device.

Colin blushed from hairline to neck. He would look like a snooper; he now *felt* like a snooper. *Act casually,*

Thanksgiving, and it has to be December. It's a twelve-week schedule. Does he *know* what Yorkshire's like in December? January? Does he *care*? It *rains*. It pisses with rain the entire time. It *snows*. Villages get cut off . . .'

'Cool it,' said Thalia.

'We have a start date! My sanity *depends* on that start date. We're *never* going to start – I see that now. If he moves the whole shoot to California, I won't be surprised. California? What am I saying? Why not Indonesia? Anne Brontë in Ecuador? How about the Zambezi? We could shift the whole fucking thing to the Amazon basin, how about that?'

'Relax. He likes you,' Thalia said.

'*Likes me? Likes me?* He's destroying me. He's ripped up months of work—'

'He always does that.'

'That bloody man is driving me insane. *Nuts*. Twelve hours – nearly twelve hours I've been sitting there, and what's been my contribution? *Buts*. But, but, but, but . . .'

Colin kicked a trash can violently, hurting his foot.

'Listen,' said Thalia, when the echoes of his anguish had died away, 'if you're going to survive this, just remember one thing. I've worked with him ten years, and I know . . .'

'What?' Colin cried. 'What?'

'He's the best, OK?' Thalia patted his arm. 'Super-cunt, obviously – but still the best . . .'

'He's playing games with me! I know it! I can feel it!'

'So?' Thalia gave a little smile. 'Play some fucking games back. Ciao, Colin.' She gave him a matronly wave. 'Have a nice evening. See you tomorrow. Oh – he wants us an hour earlier. He's altering the end. Seven a.m., all right?'

* * *

In her bedroom at the Pierre, Lindsay was getting ready for her dinner with Colin. She was sitting on her bed in her bra and underpants while her friend and senior assistant, Pixie, applied some peculiar pungent gel to her hair. Pixie had taken a liking to Colin, and was exhibiting great interest in the imminent dinner, which she referred to as a hot date. She had decided that, in honour of the occasion, Lindsay needed a complete make-over. This make-over, involving a bath, then the application of various potions, unguents, scents, restorative creams and foot-sprays, had been going on for some while. Lindsay, who had covered six fashion shows that day, was too tired and dispirited to argue. Pixie, born bossy, was taking full advantage of her uncharacteristic passive state.

'Keep *still*,' she said, dragging a comb painfully across Lindsay's scalp. 'I'm *transforming* you, sod it, and I can't do it properly if you keep jiggling about . . .'

'Give it a rest, Pixie. Who cares what I look like anyway? I'm trying to read my goddamn phone messages, and it's not easy when I'm being scalped.'

'Colin cares. You've read those messages five times already. Look left, I need to check the back.'

Lindsay sighed and obeyed. It was true, she now knew these messages by heart. During her absence, Markov and Jippy had called (they were now in Crete; 'Off to the Minotaur's lair any minute,' the message read). Gini Lamartine had called about Thanksgiving arrangements, as yet undecided; some sad person from Lulu Sabatier's office had called (for the seventh time in seven days); various dull, work-connected people had called, and Lindsay's mother had called to suggest a few thousand purchases Lindsay might like to make for her in Saks.

Rowland McGuire had *not* called. He had not called once in the past week. He was, presumably, not interested in testing her intuition after all, or perhaps he had simply forgotten, been distracted. Lindsay's

intuition, ever acute, could put a shape to that distraction. Given Rowland's past conquests, it was likely to measure 34, 24, 34; it would be a great deal younger than she was, and would in a short while be discarded – such was life.

'I don't even know why I'm *doing* this,' she said snappishly.

'You're just nervous. You're having dinner with this very handsome, sexy man. You're about to get lucky. Relax.'

'Handsome? Sexy? Who is this?'

'Are you blind?' Pixie giggled. 'One glance from those blue eyes and my nipples go hard . . . He's delicious.'

'He's *nice*,' Lindsay corrected. 'Kind, gentlemanly, rather old-fashioned . . .'

'He won't be old-fashioned in bed. I can always tell. Ah well, you older women get all the luck . . .'

'I don't even want to go out,' Lindsay sighed. 'I want to stay in, eat chocolates and lie in bed. What's in that hair stuff anyway? It smells *weird*.'

'Magic,' Pixie sniffed. 'Yams, actually. And don't worry, the smell wears off after a bit. It's absolutely the latest thing. Eco-friendly, one hundred per cent pure natural ingredients, *and* it attacks the free radicals . . .'

'I have free radicals in my *hair*?'

'At your age, Lindsay, you have free radicals lurking everywhere. Face facts.'

Lindsay faced them. She could sense the free radicals crawling around. They had long given up on such minor targets as her complexion, she thought; they were now infesting her head and heart; they were swimming up and down in her blood.

'Turn your head this way . . .' Pixie examined her. 'Oh yes, – *excellent*. I'm aiming at a *soignée* look, très 1930s *débutante*, with Berlin nightclub undertones. Think Dietrich, then think Nancy Mitford. I want sultry *and* debonair . . .'

'I've never looked sultry in my life, and I've never felt less debonair. Get a move on, Pixie, I'm fed up with this. My feet feel sticky . . .'

'They're *meant* to feel sticky. It's the papaya juice in that foot-spray. Just wait awhile – you'll feel you're walking on air . . . Hey, your skin is really good, you know that? You on HRT by any chance?'

'Will you give me a break, Pixie? Pay attention: no, I'm *not*. And the menopause is a long, long, *long* way off.'

'Only asking. I didn't really think you were. There's no need to be so sensitive.'

Pixie made a face at her and continued her ministrations. Lindsay sank deeper into the slough of despondency. The menopause, with luck, should be a decade away; on the other hand, as women's magazines never ceased to remind her, it could strike at any time, for like all her sex, she was at the mercy of hormones. Hormones, chemicals, free radicals; why, within her own body a nasty civil war, a guerrilla war was taking place. Pixie, of course, believed that war could be won – but then Pixie was such a believer. She believed in tofu and aerobics and mantras and collagen injections and miracle creams that cost 200 dollars for a very small jar. She believed in the beauty industry, where science and ju-ju interlinked, and she believed in *clothes*. In the gospel according to Pixie, there were very few problems in life that could not be solved by intelligent shopping, and spiritual fulfilment could be bought for the price of a new dress.

Pixie's religion, as Lindsay was aware, had once been her own. If she had never been quite such a born-again evangelist as Pixie was, she too had bowed down before fashion and worshipped at the high altar of couture. Now, finally, finally, she could admit at long last that she had lapsed. Farewell false gods, Lindsay thought, feeling virtuous.

Pixie stepped back, her task completed, and Lindsay turned to the mirror, examining her handiwork. The new hairstyle, more intricate than her usual one, was surprisingly effective. Lindsay's gloom diminished.

'You know I think that papaya stuff is actually working?' she said. 'I feel quite refreshed.'

'Sure you do. Now we have to find you something to wear.'

Pixie moved off to the closets and began rummaging about. Lindsay stretched and examined her ringless hands, the nails of which Pixie had painted a curious but interesting purplish-black. How revealing that Pixie should consider Colin Lascelles handsome, she thought; could she be right? She must look at him more carefully tonight.

'Tell me, Pixie,' she said, looking at her with affection, 'will you ever get married, d'you think?'

Pixie was twenty-one. 'No way,' she said.

'What about children? You'd like children one day, I expect.'

'Maybe. But only if I'm rich enough. Having kids finished my mother. That's not going to happen to me.'

'And what about love, Pixie – how d'you feel about

Pixie straightened up with a hiss; she held up her two index fingers in the shape of a cross, as if warding off a vampire.

'Bad magic,' she said.

Lindsay was impressed. She did not altogether agree, but she was impressed. Pixie, one of six children, born in Liverpool and brought up in some hardship, had already come a long way. Lindsay, who had given her a start five years before, intended to help her go further. Accordingly, when she resigned, she had advised Max very strongly to promote Pixie to Fashion Editor. Max, who did not consort with lowly fashion assistants, but who had glimpsed Pixie – she was hard to miss – in

the elevators and corridors at the *Correspondent*, had groaned.

'She has green hair,' he said.

'Don't be ridiculous, that was *years* ago. Now she looks like Susie Parker, supermodel circa 1958. You must have seen her – tailored suits, a little hat with a veil, high-heel shoes, stockings with seams, gloves and a Queen Mother handbag . . .'

'That was *her*?' Max had wavered, then entrenched. 'She's a *child*,' he said.

'She's twenty-one. Fashion editors need to be young. Hire her.'

'I'll think about it,' said Max.

Lindsay had continued her promote-Pixie campaign ever since. Before leaving London, she had conceived a cunning plan which, she had been certain, she could slide past Max. She and Pixie would spend roughly a week covering the actual collections, then roughly ten days in New York on fashion shoots. Over Thanksgiving, Lindsay would take some vacation time and Pixie would return to London. During Lindsay's absence, Pixie could nurse these fashion stories through to press, and Max could see how she progressed.

Lindsay kept these dates and plans somewhat vague, and was careful to present them to Max late on her last day in London, when he was in the middle of a news crisis.

'Fine, excellent,' Max had said, when he finally had time to see her. He smiled a small feline smile. 'In other words, Lindsay, I pay your air fares and your hotel bills at the Pierre for around three weeks, during part of which period you research the American end of your Chanel biography – a biography that has nothing to do with this newspaper. Am I right?'

Lindsay cursed under her breath. 'I'm being paid peanuts for this biography,' she said. 'I won't be able to afford air fares. It would only be the odd hour off, Max.'

'No, it wouldn't. You intend to hole up in some archive and let Pixie handle those New York fashion shoots. Then, when I congratulate you on how good they are, you're going to inform me that Pixie did them, thus clinching her appointment.' He sighed. 'Lindsay, you make a lousy Machiavelli; I can read you like a book. This is out of character; you're the only journalist I know who *doesn't* fiddle her expenses. I've always felt you lacked creativity in that respect.'

'I'll bet Rowland doesn't fiddle them either.'

'Rowland?' Max shrugged. 'Oh, Rowland's probity wears one out. Ah well, I'm really quite fond of you, I'm feeling charming today. OK. Done.'

He scribbled his initials, authorizing these plans with a speed that made Lindsay suspicious at once.

'What about Pixie?' she said. Max's manner became opaque.

'I'm still thinking about it. I'm consulting. I haven't ruled out the idea. Not yet . . .'

Lindsay had informed him tartly that this was wise, since he knew nothing whatsoever about fashion, whereas she knew a great deal and was always right. Max acquiesced to this pronouncement with his . . . grace. Lindsay continued to mull this over, to plot and plan, and had finally decided, in New York, the previous day, to inform Pixie. 'The job's yours, Pixie,' she had said, 'if you play your cards right.'

Pixie had blushed beneath her layers of perfect 1958 *maquillage*; then the story came out. As Lindsay well knew, Pixie said, she had a brilliant career plan. She intended to be editing English *Vogue* by the time she was thirty, and American *Vogue* as soon as was feasible after that. Accordingly, half an hour after Lindsay resigned, Pixie had marched upstairs to the sanctum of Max's offices. There, his trio of stuck-up secretaries had first ignored her, then told her to shift. Pixie had not shifted; she had sat there for two and a half hours until

finally, at eight o'clock in the evening, Max had taken pity on her and agreed to see her for three and a half minutes.

'Very Max,' Lindsay said, thoughtfully, working out the time scheme of these events.

This was fine, Pixie continued, since she only needed two minutes anyway. Inside the sanctum, she had informed Max that she had earned promotion, that if she didn't get it she would go to *Vogue*, who had been chasing her for months, and that if she did get it, she would want to make changes.

'Changes?' Lindsay said, in a faint voice.

Pixie had presented Max with a list of these changes, fifteen in number. Max read it, laughed, and offered her a drink. They had then discussed his five children and Pixie's budgerigar. Pixie had decided that, despite his suit and his posh accent, she could do business with Max. The upshot of all this was that, provided Lindsay did not change her mind, the position of Fashion Editor was within Pixie's grasp.

'Oh, and I raised him five thousand,' Pixie added, in a nonchalant voice.

'Five thousand? That bastard. That lying, devious . . .'

'It was *easy*, Lindsay. You could have done it any time. You never push hard enough on the money front. Max is a sweetie, a pussy-cat . . .'

'Yes, with very sharp claws. Make sure he doesn't claw that five thousand back from your budget, Pixie, because he'll certainly try . . . You actually discussed *salary*?'

'Sure. On a putative basis, of course.'

Lindsay, by then coming out of shock, had begun to laugh. She laughed at Pixie's ambition and Max's poker-game skills, and she laughed at her own vanity most of all. Fond as she was of both Max and Pixie, it had not truly occurred to her that she was dispensable. She had assumed Max would fight to keep her, and that Pixie, with luck, might find her a hard act to follow. Her

disillusionment hurt at first. She had been dispensable as a wife, Lindsay thought; now she was dispensable as a mother *and* as an editor. She felt a flood of self-pity at this realization, which she was wise enough to indulge to the full for an hour or two. Then, gradually, her natural optimism reasserted itself. Such lessons were salutary; the little rehearsals life organized for everyone – in the final analysis, after all, death ensured everyone would be dispensable, she told herself.

Now, watching Pixie sashay back and forth between closets and drawers, selecting a costume for a meeting that, alas, was not the hot date Pixie supposed, it occurred to her that Pixie's revelations were doubly useful. Not only had they induced a saintly state of forbearance and wisdom, they had also ensured that there was now no going back. The luxury of changing her mind, a luxury Lindsay was aware she indulged in too often, was ruled out. This was good – now the bridges were burned, the Rubicon was crossed. She at once felt a surge of energy and bounced off the bed.

'That red dress,' she said, 'that's what I want to wear – the red dress.'

Pixie rolled her eyes. 'Per – leaze,' she said.

'What's wrong with it? It's great. People like it. Rowland McGuire likes it.'

Pixie thrust the red dress to the back of the closet. She pulled out a black suit, a white silk T-shirt, a pair of stockings, black shoes with kitten heels, and some fake pearls that looked like Chanel fake pearls in a kind light.

'Take the bra *off*,' she said. 'I want *subtle*. Just the occasional hint of nipple, for Colin's sake. Don't argue – *trust*. And never quote Rowland McGuire on clothes to me. I may lust after Rowland, but he knows *nothing* about what makes a woman look good. Rowland should concentrate on women's underwear . . .' She paused, smiling. 'As, of course, one gathers he does . . .'

'Yes, yes, yes.' Lindsay said very fast, removing the bra and diving into the T-shirt. She knew Pixie was about to launch herself on the subject of Rowland's physical charms, alleged sexual prowess and past amatory exploits. This recitative, of which Pixie was fond, and which might or might not be accurate, could continue at Homeric length. Lindsay did not want to hear about Rowland's putative past amours, and she certainly did not want to hear the details of any present ones. Pixie's reading, in any case, was useless; she came at the subject of Rowland from the wrong philosophic and moral viewpoint. As far as Pixie was concerned, Lindsay thought crossly, it was a truth universally acknowledged that any man in possession of a woman's company must be in want of a fuck.

She closed her ears to Pixie's lewd commentary and emerged from the T-shirt red-faced.

'So tell me truthfully now,' Pixie was saying. 'Am I right? Did you and Rowland ever ...'

'What? What?' Lindsay said. 'Certainly not. For heaven's sake ...'

'Pity, because it is heaven, by all accounts. I'd have liked to know if it was true ...' She gave a ~~deep~~ sigh. 'Just, like, the best sex ever. Eight times a night.'

'Don't be so goddamn ridiculous,' Lindsay began to yank on the stockings. 'No-one does it eight times a night. Less is more, Pixie. Remember that.'

'If you say so, Lindsay,' Pixie replied in the most irritating manner possible. 'If you say so ...' Her eyes narrowed. 'Are you telling me the truth? You're sure you never - not even once?'

'No, I damn well didn't. Rowland is a colleague. Can we change the subject and change it now, please?'

'OK. OK.' Pixie looked thoughtful. 'It's just - I've noticed him looking at you, once or twice, and I could have sworn that ...'

Lindsay put on the skirt, the jacket and the shoes.

This took her at least thirty seconds and demonstrated consummate self-control, she felt.

'What could you have sworn?' she said.

'Nothing, nothing. Put it this way, *maybe* he was admiring your work, but I got a rather different impression . . .'

'Twaddle,' Lindsay said, with firmness. 'Tosh. Romantic drivel. When was this?'

'Oh, back in the summer some time . . .'

Pixie made an airy gesture. 'You were wearing that cream dress.'

'Really? I've always liked that dress.'

'And another occasion – when you were going straight to the theatre with him from work, September some time?'

'I remember vaguely. September the eighth.'

'He helped you on with your coat, and I caught that *look* on his face . . .'

Pixie shrugged. 'I was probably imagining it. You were putting him down as usual, telling him how arrogant he is – that's why you didn't notice, I expect.'

'Putting him down?' Lindsay began, frowning. 'No, Pixie – I don't do that . . .'

'You never *stop* doing it, Lindsay.' Pixie gave her a kind look. 'I know you don't mean it, and so does he most of the time, but you've got a wicked tongue and you hurt him sometimes. Pity about that – you might have been in there with a chance . . .'

Lindsay turned to look at her own reflection. She would *silence* that tongue of hers, she thought; she would cut that tongue out if necessary. Never ever again, no matter how provoked, would she give Rowland McGuire a sharp answer. From now on, in her capacity as his friend, of course, she would speak with a becoming, a womanly sweetness; she would anoint Rowland with the balm of her female discourse . . . I shall be *dulcet*, she resolved, and not just to Rowland, but to all the male sex. Perhaps a certain tartness, even a

shrewishness, had been her problem all along, she thought. And how astonishing that Pixie, whose instincts were usually acute for such nuances, should think she might have been in there with a chance.

Resolving to reform, and to start practising this new mildness of tongue immediately – she could practise on Colin over dinner, she realized; how fortunate – she executed a little pirouette. Pixie examined her, critically, from head to foot. The two women's eyes met in the mirror; both smiled.

'Well, I have to say it – you look great. I've improved you no end. Your skin's radiant, your eyes are shining . . . Quite a transformation.' Pixie gave her a sidelong sly glance. 'I can't take all the credit, there must be another reason . . . Anticipation, perhaps?'

'What?' Lindsay looked at her blankly. 'Oh, of Colin, you mean? Well, it will be nice to have a quiet dinner somewhere . . .'

'Quiet, huh?' Pixie smiled. 'You like him, maybe? I wouldn't blame you. Thin but Byronic. Nice butt. *Wild* hair. Great line in Levis. Well hung. Dresses to the left – that's always a good sign . . .'

'How observant you are, Pixie. I must remember that.'

'And quite an operator too, I'd say . . .'

'An operator?' Lindsay shook her head vehemently. 'No, Pixie, you've got hold of the wrong end of the stick. He's sweet. Volatile. A bit naïve. Not very sure of himself . . .'

'Oh yeah? Like, he finds out what flight you're on, and switches to it himself. Then he chats up that stewardess at Heathrow – I watched him do it, Lindsay – and gets you both bumped up to First Class? I've seen him with you, in the bar, gazing at you with those innocent blue eyes, looking like butter wouldn't melt in his mouth . . . I read this man, Lindsay, and I know exactly what he's after.' She giggled. 'And if I were you, I'd give it to him. After dinner tonight.'

Lindsay listened to this speech in thoughtful silence. From the vantage point of her new-won maturity and saintliness of character, she gave poor one-track-mind Pixie a pitying look.

'Pixie,' she said, 'you're getting cynical, you know that? When you're older, you'll understand. Sometimes men and women like to meet and simply *talk*. There is no hidden agenda . . .'

Pixie gave a snort. Some of Lindsay's new saintliness deserted her.

'Look, Pixie,' she continued, the sweetness of tongue also momentarily failing her, 'you know where we're going after dinner? We are going up town to this apartment he's staying in. There, Pixie, I'm going to meet his aunt – his great-aunt to be precise – because, God alone knows why, she's expressed an interest in being introduced. Now I hate to disabuse you, but she's around eighty-five years old, so I scarcely think . . .'

'Wow! You're meeting his *aunt*?' Pixie appeared to be thinking fast. Her face lit. 'Well, what d'you know, this must be *serious*. That's good. That's great. I'm really pleased for you, Lindsay. I'm getting the picture now – like, this could be *long-term*, I mean, several months, right? Lucky we did the make-over; this is obviously the *big night*. I see it all . . . You charm the old lady, get her *approval*, so to speak, then it's good night to grandma . . . He brings you back here to the Pierre, like the gentleman he is, then it's soft lights, sweet nothings . . .' Pixie took her hand in a confiding way. 'You'd like me to lend you some grass, maybe? I have a stash downstairs. It can help with a first fuck sometimes, I find; kind of eases all the tensions, revs you up for the *second fuck*, makes sure it goes all right . . .'

At this, saintliness deserted Lindsay completely. She snatched her hand back.

'Are you totally mad, Pixie? Stone-deaf? How many times do I have to say this? It's dinner, it's the

started praying as a flunkey in uniform held the doors back.

Please God, the Lindsays said silently, to a deity in which neither quite believed. Please God, let them honour Colin's reservation; please God, don't let them relegate us to a Siberian table so conspicuously ill-placed that even Colin will notice; please God, don't let them treat Colin like a worm, and please let them see that he means well and he's really very sweet . . .

Lindsay was so busy with these prayers and with squinting around trying to work out which table was nearest the rest-room exit, and whether they were being inexorably led to it, that she was seated at a banquette opposite Colin before the details of their reception began to penetrate.

Then she began to realize: the table at which they had been placed was a delightful one, and someone – she was not sure who it was, but someone pleasant with a deep, French-accented voice – had used the phrase, 'Your usual table'. This usual table, moreover, was in a quiet, even an intimate corner; it had a snowy linen cloth, candles, charming flowers; beyond it, a wine waiter, supervised by a smiling benignant grey-haired man, was opening a bottle of champagne. It occurred to her that the benignant man must be Fabian – this *aperçu* being assisted by the fact that Colin addressed him as such.

'With my compliments, Mr Lascelles,' benignant Fabian appeared to be saying. 'The 'seventy-six. I remember you liked that.' A large leather-bound folder was placed in front of her. Opening it, Lindsay saw that although it listed three types of caviar and five ways of serving lobster, the menu she had been given did not list prices.

'*Bon appétit*,' said Fabian, a man Lindsay realized she now liked very much. He withdrew. Colin gave some Gaelic toast, which he said he had once learned in

Scotland, and which ensured long life, love and happiness.

Lindsay took a sip of the champagne; it was nectar; it was a revelation; it was – no contest – the most delicious champagne she had ever drunk in her life. A tiny silence fell; remembering her new womanliness, Lindsay sweetly and sympathetically asked Colin what sort of a day he had had.

‘Ghastly. Unspeakable. Agonizing,’ he replied. ‘Here, feel. My hands are trembling.’

Lindsay took the hand he held out.

‘It’s fine. Not a tremor,’ she said, after a while.

‘Really?’ A glint of amusement appeared in Colin’s innocent blue eyes. ‘*I am* surprised. Try the pulse.’

Lindsay tried the pulse. She frowned, concentrating.

‘It’s fast,’ she pronounced eventually. ‘Definitely feverish.’

‘I thought it might be. Entirely the fault of the evil genius, of course.’

In his easy way, Colin then began to discourse on the subject of the evil genius – or Prospero, as he had apparently now decided to call him. He moved on to shred the character of the famous actor, Nic Hicks. He did this with some wit, but Lindsay was distracted and listened with only half her attention. Various suspicions were inching their way forwards from the back of her mind, and she wanted to examine them in detail. This was not easy; they kept entangling themselves in Colin’s sentences and the choice she was trying to make from the menu. Concentrate, she said to herself.

In the first place, there was, possibly, an alteration in Colin’s demeanour tonight; she could have sworn that there was a flirtatiousness in his manner when he took her hand, and an accomplished flirtatiousness at that. Perhaps, though, this thought was unworthy and had been planted by Pixie. In the second place, there was the question of Colin’s suit. She had never seen him in

a suit before, and this three-piece masterly garment, dark grey in colour with the narrowest, most discreet of pinstripes, was of a kind Lindsay had believed almost extinct. It could only have come from Savile Row, and it made her understand what Englishmen meant when they spoke of having a suit *built*. The suit; the choice of restaurant; Colin's reception there . . . the suspicions swelled and took on a monstrous shape. It occurred to Lindsay that, judging from this evidence, Colin Lascelles might be rich.

This idea distressed Lindsay, who was wary of the rich in general, and wary of rich men in particular. Sooner or later, a lordliness and a crass insensitivity, which in her experience almost always accompanied wealth, became apparent. Sensing Colin's gaze, she bent her head to the menu. Fish or meat; flirtatious or merely friendly; rich or normal?

'I can't decide,' she said.

'Well, the caviar's always reliable,' Colin said, in a gentle, helpful way. 'If you like caviar, of course. The lobster's generally excellent. Great-Aunt Emily swears by the soft-shell crabs . . .'

Lindsay saw, in both senses, her entrée.

'I shall begin with the lobster,' she said. 'Cold, poached. Then the grilled sole, I think . . . That's a wonderful suit, Colin; is it in honour of Aunt Emily?'

'Most certainly not. It's in your honour. I'm glad you like it; I found it in an Oxfam shop. I'll have the same as you, I think . . .'

He placed these orders with a waiter who had instantly appeared at his elbow. He opened the tome of a wine list, flicked the pages briefly, closed it, and made a tiny movement. The wine-waiter materialized.

'They have some very good Montrachet, Lindsay, would you like that?'

Lindsay, to whom alcohol was alcohol, and useful when nervous, felt pretty sure that she had drunk

Montrachet on some occasion and liked it very much. She said so.

'I love all Sauvignons,' she added.

'Oh.' Colin looked confused. 'Well, this is a white burgundy, but if you'd rather have . . .'

'No, no, no. I love burgundies too. I love everything, in fact.'

Colin smiled. 'We'll stay with the champagne for the moment,' he said. 'Then, the Le Montrachet DRC, I think. The nineteen seventy-eight. If you'd bring it with the fish.' The waiter departed.

Colin gave Lindsay what she felt was a curious look.

'Better be prudent, I think,' he remarked, in a meaningful way.

'Yes, yes,' said Lindsay, still weighing the provenance of the marvellous suit. 'Ever since that lunch in Oxford, I've reformed. I'll never get drunk again in my life.'

'Nor I,' said Colin, laying some stress on this.

'They seem to know you here, Colin?'

'A bit.' He met her gaze unwaveringly. 'It's because of Aunt Emily. This place is sort of her local.'

Lindsay opened her mouth to say, Local, huh? and shut it again.

'Really?' she said, in an encouraging tone, and, to her surprise, found no more was needed; Colin was off and away at once.

'Well, she lives not far from here, you see. She has an apartment in this amazing building, 1910, Hillyard White was the architect. I wanted you to see it – that's partly why I thought we'd pop in on Emily tonight. It's one of the most extraordinary buildings in Manhattan, and it's absolutely untouched – not a single detail despoiled, for once. Only the Dakota is in the same class, but even the Dakota can't compete. The staircase . . .'

Lindsay was glad to see the effectiveness of the prompt-feminine, but had no intention of being deflected by architecture.

'But you obviously come here often yourself, Colin?' she said.

'If I'm in New York, I usually drop in – with Emily. She's been coming here for about three hundred years, you see; in fact I think she used to come here with her father. And she first brought me here when I was eight, so it's become a tradition, and it always cheers her up. She gets lonely – not that she'd ever admit that. Too many of her old friends are dead or housebound, and Emily's still packed with energy, indefatigable, a true daughter of the revolution . . . I hope you'll like her. I do, very much.'

Lindsay was impressed by this speech, for its sincerity was transparent, and she warmed to Colin. Her suspicions backed off a little way, and Lindsay felt glad. The counsel for the defence was trouncing the prosecution, she decided, as the lobster arrived; Colin was far too sweet-natured to be rich.

'So, is she an aunt on your mother's side or your father's?' Lindsay asked, too occupied by the appearance of the lobster to notice that, at this question, Colin exhibited a faint constraint.

'My mother's. My mother was American.' He paused. 'She – well, she died when I was eight.'

'Oh Colin. I'm so sorry – ' Lindsay at once looked up and placed her hand on his arm. To her astonishment, she saw that he was blushing. He blushed slowly and agonizingly, from the neck of his impeccable shirt to his hairline; he blushed like the heroine of a nineteenth-century novel, and Lindsay, appalled that she seemed to have inflicted this, took his hand in hers at once.

'Whatever's wrong, Colin?' she began.

'*Everything*,' Colin burst out. 'Why did I do this? Why didn't I *think*? I should have known – you don't like it here, do you? It's not your kind of place. I could tell when we came in – but I thought it might grow on you. And now, you're trying to be polite, but it's a *disaster*.'

Dragging you off to see my aunt – why did I decide to do that? I must have been mad. Insane. We should be going on to a nightclub, something like that . . .’

‘I hate nightclubs,’ Lindsay said.

‘. . . And this place! I must want my head examined. We should have gone somewhere new, somewhere fashionable; one of those minimalist places, in SoHo, somewhere like that. Hundreds of tables, lemon grass in everything. Californian food . . .’

‘Colin – will you listen to me a minute?’

‘I *know* those places. I could have rung them up. *Why* didn’t I think of that? *Why* did I start talking about architecture? *Architecture!* Christ! I could see you were bored; you cut me off, and what do I start on – my *aunt*. My aunt and the evil genius, it’s a wonder you haven’t gone to sleep . . .’

‘Colin.’ Lindsay pressed his hand, and the tirade bubbled a bit more, then stopped.

‘That’s better. Now listen to me. I hate those SoHo restaurants. I hate those restaurants wherever they are. I loathe lemon grass, I loathe the waiters auditioning when they recite the menu, I loathe the table-hopping and the celebrity-spotting. I like it *here*; I like it very much.’

‘Really?’ Colin looked at her in a doubtful way. ‘You’re not just saying that?’

‘No. I promise you I’m not. It’s wonderful here – an immense treat. This is the best champagne I’ve ever tasted in my life. I’m looking forward to meeting your aunt and I’m quite looking forward to eating this lobster, which I’ll do once you’ve calmed down. And while I eat it, you can talk to me about architecture, or your family, or the evil genius, and I shan’t be bored in the least. Now . . .’ She hesitated. ‘I’ll tell you what was worrying me earlier, if you like.’

‘Go on.’

‘To tell you the truth, I was mainly worrying about

the bill, because it's going to be catastrophic, Colin . . .'

'Well, yes.' Colin was showing signs of recovery. 'I expect it is.'

'Exactly. So you shouldn't have done this. It was very sweet of you, but it wasn't necessary . . .'

'Sweet?' Colin frowned, but the glint of amusement had returned to his eyes.

'All right – kind, thoughtful. But unless you've come into a fortune recently . . .'

'Recently? No, alas.' Colin smiled. 'But Tomas Court is quite generous, you know, Lindsay. It won't hurt to push the boat out a bit, once or twice.'

He answered her with such frankness, with such an engaging smile, that Lindsay felt ashamed of her suspicions. They were low things and they all scurried away at once. Her face cleared and she gave a sigh of relief.

'Well, I'm very glad about the fortune,' she said. 'I hate riches; they get in the way, don't you think? You know, Scott Fitzgerald, "The rich are different from you and me" – all that.'

'Have some more champagne.' Colin paused. 'I agree. A very good quotation, that.'

'But you're being extravagant,' Lindsay continued. 'So I want you to promise we can split the bill, then it will only be semi-catastrophic, all right?'

Colin hesitated then. He looked at Lindsay for some while, an odd expression in his eyes. He looked faintly bewildered, Lindsay thought, and faintly stunned, as if some unknown assailant had crept up behind him and struck a blow from the back. Then he began to smile. The eyebrows Katya had described as diabolic rose in two quizzical peaks; the blue eyes lit with a deepening warmth and amusement. Katya had been right, Lindsay realized, and so had Pixie: Colin Lascelles was not only good-looking, he was an attractive man. He did not attract her, obviously, but she was beginning to see how he could be extremely attractive to someone else.

He decided he would play it by ear. In the meantime, he thought, it would be wise, given Lindsay's opinions, to be more careful. Lindsay noticed *details*, ill-considered details, give-away details such as suits.

When Lindsay was looking away, he seized his opportunity, and, hidden by the tablecloth, removed from his wrist the leather-strapped, wafer-thin gold Patek Philippe watch. He could hardly claim to have found *that* at Oxfam. He stuffed it into his pocket, feeling much more confident at once.

'So,' said Lindsay, leaning forward and smiling in the most enchanting and feminine way, 'tell me more about your aunt's apartment building, Colin.'

Colin, who was not intoxicated, instantly felt so.

'Well,' he said, 'it's called the Conrad building, and it's a very strange, even sinister place.'

IX

Alone in his loft at TriBeCa, earlier that evening, Tomas Court had also been conducting a dialogue about the Conrad building, a dialogue none the less forceful for being imagined. The two speakers were himself and his wife, and the dialogue began as soon as Thalia, Mario and Colin left.

The minute the door closed on them, it burst out in his mind, a cacophany of contradictions, interruptions and pleas, of ill-phrased assertions and ill-timed *non sequiturs*. Court stood quietly in the shadows of the room, outside the circle of bright light that lit the work table, and let this chaos into his mind. He was used to this form of possession; when he ceased working, a process that demanded all his energy and will-power, he always felt drained and bloodless, emptied and light-headed: an energy vacuum had been created, and into this vacuum anything, including malevolence, might rush.

Today it was to be the Conrad. So be it, he thought, and waited, not allowing his breathing to quicken or tighten. He knew that, given time, this cacophany and havoc would resolve itself. He fixed his eyes on one feature of the room – it never mattered which feature, and in this case it happened to be the bars of the window, opposite which he stood. The bars, eight feet tall, and at least six across, formed a crucifix shape, which amused him distantly, since he was without religious belief. He looked at this cross, and was aware that outside in the street some absurd commotion was taking place: he

could hear that his English location manager was giving vent to his feelings, but as far as Court was concerned he might just as well have been shouting his protests in Urdu. Lascelles's laments were a cry from another country and Court felt an absolute lack of curiosity in anything Lascelles said.

After a while, as Lascelles's voice died away and silence fell in the room, the dialogue with his wife quietened; her interruptions became fewer, then ceased altogether; he was left listening to his own voice. Why? said his voice. Why, why, why? Why live there? Why invite rejection? Why do this?

He felt stronger at once, the moment of mental palsy over and done with, he told himself. The *why* questions were familiar demons; they had been plaguing him for months. It was now safe to move, safe to begin functioning again, although he truly functioned, as he well knew, only when he worked. He picked up one of the cardboard boxes which littered the loft, and carried it across to the circle of light on his black work table.

He took no second look at the welter of coloured papers still strewn across its surface; he had not the least inclination either to re-examine them or tidy them up. Each day, embarking on work, whether here, on location, or in a studio, he would know, before he began, exactly where he aimed, and how much expenditure of spirit, energy and will-power would be necessary that day to take him there. When he reached that pre-ordained point, he stopped, and had been known to do so in mid-sentence, or mid-take. If necessary, he would drive or drag others on with him to this stopping place; if necessary, he would manipulate, annoy, abuse, frighten, trick or charm them *en route*, but get there he would.

He opened the lid of the box and moved the tumble of shooting schedules to one side to make space. During the day, these papers held magic, for they were the raw materials of his art, as essential to it, in their way, as

celluloid, cameras, actors and light. Now, since he was at rest, they were inert, and merely his instruments; they were without power until tomorrow at seven in the morning, when he again picked them up.

From the box he took out the material which various researchers had been gathering for him for months. Every scrap of information here concerned the Conrad building. There were old architectural journals; batches of photographs new and old; photocopies of the original plans for the building, plans which had been lying in some city hall archive for decades. Court laid them all out on the table and began to examine them minutely; it was not the first time he had done this.

He examined the, to him, grotesque façade of the Conrad, with its baroque excesses and its Gothic turrets. It seemed to him that the architect had given the building a forbidding and secretive look. He disliked the extravagance of its great gaping maw of an entrance; he disliked the *oeil-de-boeuf* windows which ornamented those turrets and punctuated the roof-line, and which gave the building a menacing, many-eyed look, as if it were continuously hungry, and continuously vigilant.

His wife was seeking to buy apartment three, situated on the north corner of the building, overlooking Central Park. She had already viewed this apartment several times; she had refused to allow him to accompany her – proving to be obstinate on this point.

‘Tomas,’ she had said, ‘you don’t want me to live there and you don’t believe I’m going to be allowed to live there. No. What’s the point?’

Thwarted in this desire, he had turned to this research material instead. Now, he inspected the architectural plans, drawn up by Hillyard White over eighty years before. He traced the walls of apartment three, examined its orientation, dimensions and fenestration. He could see the disposition of the rooms; the photographs and descriptions in the various books a

journals gave him an idea of how this interior might look. He could half see some rich space with many closets, with rooms which led into further rooms, and with yet more rooms beyond that. The apartment was very large; he now realized for the first time that it was a duplex. Towards the rear, there was a second storey, secreted away; this would be the site of the main bedrooms; this was where his wife would sleep. His wife had her final meeting with the board of the Conrad, with the committee who would decide her fate, the following morning; she would be given their decision then. Suppose that decision, against all the odds, was yes? How did you *reach* that second storey, that bedroom?

He bent more closely to the plans, which, to a non-expert, were not easy to decipher. There was the staircase – he saw it now – but how did you reach the staircase?

He only half saw, half glimpsed, he realized. It was like looking into some marvellous lighted room from the street outside, and then, just when all its secrets were about to be revealed, some officious person came along and closed the shutters in his face.

He was suddenly seized with anger; his hands began to shake. With a furious, violent gesture, he swept the papers to the floor. Immediately, the chaos returned, and those two voices began arguing again in his head. 'Oh, it torments me, Tomas, it torments me,' his wife said. This time, he shouted his wife down and drowned her out, anger giving him an eloquence that, when they actually had this argument, he rarely possessed.

He spelled out to her the insanity of this plan, a misconception from the first. Why was she continuing with the shaming procedures inflicted on her by the Conrad board, who for months now had been vetting her finances and every other aspect of her life? Why had she hired, at huge expense, first a real-estate broker, then one of Manahattan's most expensive law firms to

press her suit? All this money and effort would be wasted, he shouted, raining his reasons down on her now-bowed, imagined head. Neither money nor lawyers turned the key of admission at the Conrad, and if the broker – some man called Jules McKechnie – was claiming otherwise, she was being taken for a ride. Could she not see that?

The Conrad, he reminded her, was a co-operative; its board could choose whom to refuse and whom to admit. For decades, the Conrad board had weaselled its way around the law, in particular the laws regarding discrimination on grounds of colour, race or sex. It was a *bastion*, and it did not raise its drawbridge to actresses, divorced women with young children, or the *nouveau riche*. Did she not know, had her precious broker and her over-priced lawyers not *checked*: no member of the acting profession, let alone a movie star of her fame, had ever lived in the Conrad, though many had sought admission. And no young children had been brought up in the Conrad for a quarter of a century at least.

The occupants of the Conrad, he continued, were ageing, rich, white, Anglo-Saxon Protestants. They believed in the Social Register, since they, and everyone they cared to know, were listed in it; they believed in money, provided it was inherited, and thus disinfected of all taint; and they believed in an Episcopalian God, while failing to practise any of His teachings. They are *evil*, he thundered; that building is *evil*, and I will not allow my son to be brought up in that place.

'Our son,' his wife's voice quietly corrected him, and he heard again her one attempt to justify her decision. 'I want to live there, Tomas. I see it differently from you. I shall feel safe there. This has nothing to do with you. It's *my* choice.'

That reply, which had infuriated him when she gave it, and which infuriated him now, explained nothing. It was in his wife's nature to explain herself and her actions

as little as possible, and it was this intransigency in her, this refusal ever to allow him to be sure he understood her, which bound him to her – or so he sometimes thought.

In a sudden rage with her and with himself, he slammed out of the apartment, wearing only a jacket and unprepared for the cold of the streets. He had a car available to him, and a discreet, reliable driver whom he could have called upon, but he disliked others knowing his movements as much as he disliked them knowing his thoughts, so he flagged down a cab, knowing he should go back for a coat, but refusing to do so. He had to be careful of cold air, of course, just as he had to be careful of dust, pollen, pollution, smoke and a thousand other hidden substances in the air; this disability he loathed and resented. His anger deepening, he told the cab driver to take him uptown to the Carlyle, where his son would be waiting for him. Then, changing his mind, and knowing he needed something else, he told him to go to the Minskoff theatre, where his wife would be on stage, and that night's performance of *Estella* would now be taking place.

Why? Why? Why? This question pursued him uptown in the cab; it pursued him across the noisy, crowded space of Times Square, where he abandoned the cab, and it pursued him to the theatre, where he paused, looking at the lights that spelled out his wife's name on the theatre front.

Why live there, and why exclude him in this way, when he was sure she still loved him and wished for a reconciliation as much as he did? Why, when she was eager to work with him, did she still refuse to live with him? Did her continuing fear of Joseph King explain this decision – or was there some other, hidden reason? He glanced over his shoulder, having, as he often did, the sensation that he was being watched. No-one

appeared to be watching him, so he turned down the small alleyway leading to the stage door and entered the theatre, feeling as he had done on many occasions that he would find the answers to all his questions here, that they lay very close, within reach.

He was known at the stage door, and no-one detained him there, for these visitations of his were frequent. He went first to Natasha's dressing-room, where his way was blocked, first by the strange androgynous creature Natasha insisted on having as her dresser, and then by one of the bodyguards – the favourite bodyguard, the Texan.

Court was a tall man himself, but the Texan was even taller. Court looked coldly at his blond, muscled good looks. He looked like an overgrown child, and was possibly more intelligent than he appeared.

'I don't see that you can offer my wife much protection if she's on stage, and you're here by her dressing-room,' he said.

'I agree. But Ms Lawrence insists.'

'Give my wife a message, would you? Tell her I need to talk to her. I'm going up to the Carlyle now to see my son. I'll wait there until she gets back after the show.'

An expression of doubt passed across the man's face. 'I'm afraid she's going out after the show, sir. She's having dinner with her property broker, Jules McKechnie. I think it was mentioned . . .'

'Ah, so it was. Then tell her I'll call her tomorrow.'

'I surely will.' He paused. Tomas Court felt his blue eyes, eyes which appeared as innocent as a summer's sky, rest on his face. 'Is there anything else I can do for you, Mr Court?'

'No, there is not.'

Court turned away. He went into the backstage maze at the Minskoff, along corridors, through fire doors, up flight after flight of stone stairs. He paused on one of the upper landings, a warning constriction beginning to

tighten around his chest. Then he went on, up more stairs, until, right at the top of the building, he came to the place where he had to be next.

He opened a series of doors and stepped into the lighting box, high at the back of the auditorium, above its top-most tier seats. This dark, boxed-in coffin of a room, glass-fronted, sound-proofed, jugged forward over the heads of the audience and gave him an eagle's eye view of the stage. The two technicians there, used to these unannounced visits of his, looked up, nodded, then returned their attention to the winking lights of their computer consoles. One silently passed him a pair of headphones, and Court stood there, holding them, watching the console, watching their hands moving back and forth among the switches and slides and myriad tiny green and red cue lights. He had a confused sense of being piloted, of being in flight; they were taking off, banking, gaining height. He felt that at any minute, all the answers to his questions would be there in his mind, and he would understand his wife.

He took a step towards the glass wall, felt a second's vertiginous fear of falling as he saw the deep, dark declivity of the auditorium open out beneath; then moved again, and saw across the gulf of the audience, infinitely distant, silent and gesticulating, the figure of Estella, the figure of his wife.

He watched her lips move, her mouth open and close, and her throat pulse. He watched her tenderly as, beautiful in her young girl's first-act white dress, she moved centre stage. He savoured her silence, then, with a slow reluctance, he put on the headphones. The music hit him in a wave; soaring up through the currents of the song came the sound of Estella's voice.

They had reached the fourth scene of the first act; he was hearing the duet between that cruel child, Estella, and poor, humiliated, confused, besotted Pip. Court had no liking for musicals, most of which he despised, and

scant admiration for the composer of this one. He had advised Natasha against taking this part, and had had forebodings of failure for her when she did. None of those factors was relevant now.

This particular song, one of the great hits of the show, was not even a song he liked. He could see that technically it was difficult, and that melodically it was intricate – it interwove major and minor keys in a haunting way – but he had always found its bittersweetness not to his taste. Even so, it left him defenceless. To his anger and incomprehension, the power of his wife's song bypassed his mind and sent a shock to his heart, just as – no matter how he resisted – it always did.

Again he felt that warning constriction in his chest; he heard himself make some strange wounded sound; he removed the headphones and fumbled his way out of the darkness of the box. He descended the stone staircases without seeing them, still hearing the voice of his wife, both on the Tannoy system and in his head. Halfway down the stairs, he took a wrong turn and found himself lost in that labyrinth of backstage passageways. He turned, leaned against a wall, retraced his steps, descended again, and found himself, at last, at the stage door. He ignored the man on duty there, who, on seeing him, rose with an exclamation of concern. Pushing his way through the doors, he fought to control his breathing and fought to control the anxiety which always made these paroxysms worse. Finding himself in that dimly lit alleyway, he blessed its darkness; he moved away from the door, away from prying eyes, and slumped back against a wall, now gasping for breath.

It was a bad asthma attack and the pain was acute. He listened to the sirens of this city, to the incessant growl of automobiles pumping out their poisons, as he fumbled for the inhaler he always carried. He tilted his head back and depressed the plunger once, then again,

sucking hard. At the third attempt the beta-adrenoceptor stimulants at last took effect. They soothed his breathing, if not his mind, and that fist which had been squeezing his lungs slackened its grip.

He waited, breathing quietly and shallowly. Two women entered the stage door; one man came out. No-one took the least notice of him and perhaps no-one saw him; Court, who hated others to witness these attacks, was grateful for this.

He watched the man, the unremarkable man, walk down the alleyway, turn into the street beyond and disappear. It came to him, in the clear but distanced way that ideas often did after an attack such as this, that the man could be Joseph King, who – as he had informed his wife – could be alive or dead. That man could be King, and so could any other man he encountered today, tomorrow, any day of the week.

King could be driving his taxi-cab, or taking his order in a restaurant; King could be the man he sat next to in a screening-room, or met briefly at some movie festival. King might have worked for him, or with Natasha in the past – this last suspicion, that King was connected with the movie industry in some way, having deepened recently, for King's knowledge of movies, he had come to see, was as deep and as intimate as his knowledge of Tomas Court's wife.

King was no-one, and could be almost anyone; indeed, when Court slept badly and had nightmares, as he often did, it was in Court's own mirror that he often manifested himself. And King, who had administered his poison so well, pouring the substance into his ear drop by drop, was not a man who was easily killed off. Court thought of him as immortal and invisible; even if he were dead – and Court never felt he was – he lived on in the minds of those he persecuted. In this capacity lay his peculiar evil and his peculiar strength.

Tall, short, dark, fair, old, young? After five years he

still could answer none of these questions. He leaned back against the wall, waiting for his heart-rate to slow and his breathing to relax. When it had done so, he moved away from the protection of the wall and began to walk slowly up the alley. He stationed himself at the kerb in the street beyond, averting his eyes from the flash of his wife's name on the theatre front. He watched the flow of traffic, waiting for the one cab with its light lit which would take him out of this cold foul city air and uptown to his son. Cab after cab, all occupied, and he could sense that although the pain was subduing, his disquiet was not.

Natasha had claimed, closing her bedroom door to him some months before their separation and divorce, that it was he himself who gave King power by believing, or half-believing, by dwelling on all the lies King wrote or said. She further claimed that his obsession with King had not only poisoned their marriage and permeated his work, but was slowly but surely eating away at his health. 'That man will be the death of you,' she had once said.

Court did not view his concern with King as an obsession, and if it were, that was excusable – presumably he was allowed to be obsessed with a man who knew his wife's and son's movements so precisely, and constantly issued threats? But he did acknowledge some truth in her remarks: he admitted that, for several years now, it had been King's actions or communications that brought on the worst of his asthma attacks.

The cure, then, ought to be to forget King, to put out of his mind all those whispering suggestions King wrote, or said – a process that should become easier if King had been silenced and was actually dead. Yet Tomas Court was not sure he wanted to be cured; there was a part of him, and a vibrant part, that clung to King, even as he watched him destroy his marriage and endanger his health. He now missed King's communications; sometimes, at night, when he lay on his bed, listening

to replays of King's past calls, he found himself frustrated at the five months of silence. What he wanted was a new message, another revelation, an up-date.

He needed that dark side, he thought, as a cab finally pulled in at the kerb. He needed to listen to the unspeakable. He wondered, in a distanced way, as the cab eased forward into grid-locked traffic, whether he ought to explain that to his wife. Not necessary, he decided; such ambivalences lay at the very heart of his marriage, as he had been reminded when assaulted by the power of his wife's singing, tonight.

'So this is the Conrad,' Colin Lascelles said to Lindsay, coming to a halt beneath a huge encrusted entrance portico. 'Now do you see what I mean? It is powerful, don't you think?'

'I certainly do see what you mean. Dear God, Colin . . .' Lindsay looked up at the portico, which towered over them both. The architect of the Conrad, as Colin had just been telling her over dinner, had been a strange man; the twin Conrad brothers, both financiers, who had commissioned him to design the building, had been equally strange, and – if Colin's account was accurate – the building had a strange chequered past. It boasted several ghosts, the most fearsome and vengeful of which was said to be Anne Conrad, unmarried sister to the twins, who in 1915, or thereabouts, had leaped to her death from one of the windows of the apartment she shared with her brothers. Stepping back to examine the Conrad's façade, Lindsay wondered which window this was.

Anne Conrad's manifestations were infrequent but ill-omened, Colin had said. Further details had not been forthcoming; Lindsay had intended to prompt Colin, but now she saw this building, she changed her mind. She was too suggestible: if Colin described these hauntings, she might imagine herself into an encounter with the

dead woman, who had been young, beautiful – and deranged, or so people said, Colin had added, by way of an afterthought.

She must have passed the building dozens of times, Lindsay thought, yet she had never paused to look at it. Now she did, and at night too, she realized just how magnificent and grim it was. This was how she had always imagined the House of Usher might look. She glanced across, over her shoulder, to the great tract of darkness at the heart of Manhattan that was Central Park, then looked back more closely at the Conrad building's huge entrance mouth.

A cluster of liver-coloured Corinthian columns flanked its approach steps, giving it the air of a sombre classical temple. These columns supported a vast dark carved pediment; even Lindsay's untrained eye could see, however, that the proportions here were infelicitous, for the pediment was oversized, so that the pillars seemed oppressed by its weight. They looked squat, and their appearance was not enhanced by the surface treatment of their massive stone plinths. 'Vermiculation', according to Colin, was the correct term for this doubtful form of decoration; to Lindsay's eyes, the plinths looked as if their stone had been eaten away by millions of blind, hungry worms – or maggots, perhaps.

She gave an involuntary shiver. She began to see that Hillyard White's heart had not been in the rigours of classicism in any case. There might be a suggestion of a Greekish temple, but the whole façade was a monstrous and heterogeneous sprouting of embellishments. This detail had been plundered from the French, this from the Venetians, this from the Egyptians, that from the Spanish; a smorgasbord of past centuries and architectural styles had been gobbled up and spewed forth.

'Dear God, what's *that*?' she said, realizing that even the pillars were not unadorned, and that from some

clustering stone vines mounting the wall behind them, a dark face was peering out.

'A gargoyle of sorts.' Leaning across, Colin patted its ugly head with affection. 'I shouldn't look too closely, Lindsay – some of the detailing is quite nasty.'

'What's that in his *mouth*? Oh—' Lindsay frowned; from one angle the gargoyle was biting the head off a snake; from another angle it was possibly not a snake, and the gargoyle was otherwise employed.

'In we go,' Colin said, somewhat hurriedly, taking her arm.

He drew her into a foyer (*Citizen Kane*, Lindsay thought) and greeted first a doorman, then a porter. It took Lindsay some while even to see the porter, who was dwarfed by the altar that served as his desk. They approached a wall of linenfold panelling, and Lindsay realized that although she knew how she had entered this cathedral – the entrance maw was somewhere at the other end of this nave, several miles back – she could see no other way out of it.

'Full of tricks, this building,' said Colin, delighted at this. 'I did warn you. *Not* easy to find your way around unless you know it. Even Hillyard White's plans are deceptive – which is one of the reasons why it's so secure, of course.'

He glanced around at the porter, then smiled at Lindsay.

'Don't worry,' he said, 'it gets worse, or better, depending on your point of view. Are you of a nervous disposition?'

'Very.'

'Hold my hand.' He nodded at the porter. 'We'll go up by the main stairs, Giancarlo.'

There was a low buzzing sound, and the linenfold in front of them opened up. They walked through into an inner hall, the panelling closing behind them with a hiss.

'There is an elevator,' Colin said, 'but I thought you

wouldn't mind walking up. Emily's only on the second floor, and I didn't want you to miss this.'

'No, *indeed*,' Lindsay said.

She walked forward a few paces, across a cold paved floor. She looked at the wide blood-red-carpeted oak staircase rising in front of her, which was lit at intervals by statues of blackamoors holding lamps aloft. It rose before her, then twisted back, and was cantilevered, storey by storey, so she found she was looking at the undersides of the stairs as they mounted up and up to a huge domed space which settled over the stairwell like a lid. She was in the gut of the building, she realized, and all the apartments must lead off this vast central digestive tract. The dome was at least ten storeys above her head, each floor was galleried, and an army could have marched up the stairs ten abreast, yet the effect was claustrophobic. The space was hushed, warm and curiously expectant, as if the stairs, blackamoors and shadowy galleries were waiting to see what these two new arrivals might do next.

'What do you think? Monstrous, isn't it?' Colin was looking around him with affection and pride. '*Sublimely* monstrous. I never get over it.'

The fat coils of the radiator next to Lindsay emitted a digestive gurgle, then a faint, satisfied hiss. She shivered again.

'Hitchcock would have killed for that staircase,' she said.

'Wouldn't he just?' Colin sighed. 'Embarrassing, those blackamoors. There was a move to get rid of them, a few years back. Emily nipped that in the bud *very* quickly . . .'

'She likes them? Colin - she can't possibly like them.'

'I'm afraid she does. She's not exactly politically correct.' He hesitated. 'The thing is, she was right, from a purist point of view; they *are* original. And Emily's

lived in this building all her life. In fact, she was born here. In fact . . .'

Lindsay, who was growing less keen on this visit to Aunt Emily by the second, sensed that Colin, too, might be having second thoughts. His manner, confident a moment before, was now becoming doubtful. She was beginning to recognize the symptoms of Colin's insecurities, she thought.

'I'm just wondering,' she began, 'isn't it a bit *late*, this visit, Colin? We stayed longer in the restaurant than we meant to do, and . . . She's eighty-five years old, after all . . .'

'Oh, *that's* not the problem. Emily's a nightbird; she keeps very strange hours. She nods off during the day, though she denies that, of course, and sometimes it's hard to know when she is asleep. She'll be in her chair, I'll tiptoe about, and then suddenly she'll speak and make me jump like hell . . . So this is early evening for Emily. Around midnight, she gets very lively indeed . . .'

Lindsay was now sure she recognized the symptoms of nerves, which included loquaciousness.

'But there is a problem,' she said. 'Come on, Colin, what is it?'

'Well, she's a bit deaf . . .'

'And?'

Colin considered. 'She can be a bit *odd*,' he said finally.

Lindsay wondered whether he might mean senile. Dotty? Eccentric? Slightly demented? Ninety-five per cent crazed? Since Colin was given both to overstatement *and* understatement, his remarks could be difficult to interpret. He was now looking both anxious again and downcast. Lindsay took his arm. 'Well, I'm very glad you're with me,' she said. 'With you here, I feel safe.'

Immediately she had said this, it struck her that she truly meant it; Colin's presence, for reasons she could

not exactly define, was reassuring. Her compliment, or perhaps the fact that she took his arm, seemed to allay his anxieties; his confidence returned at once.

'Not very odd,' he amplified, leading her towards the staircase, 'just odd occasionally. A bit of a tease, you might say. You may find it helps if you remember that . . .'

Lindsay braced herself for this teasing great-aunt. The stairs were not really *Psycho* material, she decided – more *Gone With the Wind*, more Tara. Hello, Scarlett and Rhett, she thought, as they began to climb them, dreamily imagining herself as a feisty O'Hara, and Rowland McGuire as an improvement on Clark Gable. Hello, Polanski, and hello *Repulsion*, she thought, as they turned into a long, galleried corridor, where hands thrust from walls holding lamps. Colin rang the doorbell to Emily's apartment and Lindsay waited for Dracula's servant to answer it. Instead, Mrs Danvers opened the door, and led them into a very large and daunting drawing-room with a du Maurier whisk of her skirts.

An old, a very old, very wrinkled, and very imperious woman held out her hand; introductions were made. Lindsay looked at Aunt Emily narrowly; Well, hello Miss Havisham, she thought.

'I want a word with you. You're late,' Angelica said, as Tomas Court entered the quiet living-room of his wife's Carlyle suite. Court moved past her without greeting her or looking at her, but his manner was often curt, even rude, and Angelica was used to this.

'I've been talking to the bodyguard . . .' he said.

'Which bodyguard?'

'The one here.' Court's manner was irritable. 'John. Jack – whatever his name is.'

'Jack.' Angelica gave him a dismissive glance. 'That's why you're over an hour late? You've been talking to

the bodyguard for an *hour*? Jonathan's been waiting up for you . . .'

'I was delayed. I got held up.'

'He won't go to sleep until he's seen you.' She paused; Court had not looked at her once and had now turned his back. She sighed. 'Maria stayed on to sit with him. He's showing her his new animal books. He wanted to show them to you. There's one on big cats . . .'

'Maria?' Court said.

Angelica sighed again. 'You've met her. You met her the other week. The one who comes to give Natasha a massage before the show sometimes. The aromatherapist. Dark hair, glasses. Jonathan likes her; she's a nice girl . . .'

'Well get rid of her. There's enough women in and out of this apartment as it is . . .'

Angelica, used to this complaint, did not reply. She left the room, and in the distance, Court heard the sound of women's voices. The aromatherapist, the voice coach, the two secretaries, the Yoga expert who taught Natasha relaxation techniques, the personal trainer, also female; Natasha's days seemed to him spent amidst a retinue of female helpers and supporters, and he loathed the way in which they treated her with a reverent concern, tending the hive, tending their queen, cosseting and protecting, grooming, feeding and honing. He found it unhealthy; Natasha had always had a tendency to surround herself with priestesses, and since their divorce, the tendency had worsened; he had often told her this.

'Hi. Good evening,' said a woman's voice. Court glanced round to see Angelica and this Maria, who was being helped into her coat. Like most of Natasha's priestesses, she was ugly, Court noted; overweight, cheaply dressed, with greasy hair tied back in an untidy bun, and hideous thick-lensed spectacles. He was making her nervous, he saw, as she glanced at Angelica in

a faltering way, and then gave him a shy smile that was not, he supposed, unsweet.

'Your son's still wide awake,' she said. 'We've had a lovely time. He's a really bright little kid. He's waiting to show you his whale book, Mr Court . . .' She glanced again at Angelica. 'I thought - better avoid the fairy stories tonight. You know, if he's still having those nightmares . . . so we just looked at the animal books. He's so cute. Hey, it's late . . . I'd better be off . . .'

Tomas Court gave her a curt nod; he listened to the sounds of female conversation and laughter as Angelica showed her out.

'Nightmares?' he said, when Angelica returned, closing the door behind her. 'What nightmares? Natasha never mentioned that.'

'He wakes up sometimes.' She avoided his gaze. 'It's been going on for a while now . . .'

'How long?'

'Well, it started around the time of the divorce, then it got better for a bit. Now it's started up again . . .'

'He never gets nightmares when he comes out to Montana. He was fine last summer. It's this place. Cooped up here; his mother out night after night . . .'

'She has to work. The run's nearly over anyway. She'll be leaving the show any day now, then . . .'

'Well, it can't be soon enough. I don't know why she did it in the first place.' He gave an irritable sigh. 'I'll have to talk to her about this. If Jonathan has nightmares, I should be informed. Why wasn't I?'

'You didn't ask, I guess.'

Angelica's tone was insolent, but then she never bothered to disguise her dislike of him. It was, indeed, more than dislike; Angelica's hostility to him had always been unwavering and forceful; it was returned in good measure. The best that could be said of their relationship was that they eyed one another with the respect of combatants fighting their own weight.

In their contests, unceasing since his marriage, Tomas Court had had one supreme advantage: he was male, and he was the husband, with all the husband's rights. This advantage, as they were both aware, had diminished since the divorce.

'Are you OK?' Angelica said now, looking him up and down. She always delighted, as Court well knew, in the least evidence of his physical disability. 'You're white. You don't look so good. You had an attack?'

'I'm fine.' He turned away. 'The pollution's bad. The traffic was bad. I'm tired. I've been working since five-thirty this morning. You can make me some coffee. Bring it through to Jonathan's room . . .'

'You want it black?'

'Yes, I do. I'm going to wait for Natasha—'

'I wouldn't do that. She'll be late. She told you, she's having dinner with that fancy broker of hers after the show, then she has an early start in the morning. The trainer comes at seven. She's having breakfast with Jules McKechnie, then . . .'

'Dinner *and* breakfast? Why's that necessary?'

Angelica gave a small gloating smile and a shrug.

'It's the committee meeting at the Conrad tomorrow, and they have to get the details right. It's important to Natasha – and she's nervous. She doesn't want anything going wrong, and it's Friday the thirteenth tomorrow – not too auspicious, right?'

Tomas Court profoundly hoped it would *not* be auspicious. He might have liked to say this; he might have liked to question Angelica further; he would certainly have liked to know whether Natasha was dining with Jules McKechnie alone, or with others. Just the mention of McKechnie's name set off those Joseph King whisperings in his head; King, his very own Iago, was always prompt on occasions such as this. Such questions, evidence of weakness, would have delighted Angelica. He looked at her bulk, at the flat hard planes

of her face, at her small and malicious black eyes, and an exhaustion close to anguish flooded through him. Sometimes, especially after an asthma attack, he no longer had the energy to fight.

'There's something you wanted to say to me?' he asked quietly.

'Sure. I want to know some things. About Joseph King. About what happened in Glacier.' She paused. 'I know what you told Natasha . . .'

'I'm sure you do.'

'And I want the truth.' She hesitated, the hostility in her face softening a little. 'I'm here with Jonathan. I'm the one who's right by his side, day and night. I need to know these things.'

'I wouldn't argue with that. I had intended—'

'I won't tell Natasha. But I need to know . . .'

Across the space of the room, their eyes met. Court turned to the door.

'Fine,' he said, 'I'll explain when I've seen Jonathan. Bring the coffee through here instead, Angelica. I won't be long . . .'

'Don't be. It's way past his bedtime; he should be asleep.'

'I want to show you the bat book now, Daddy,' Jonathan said, 'and this one on whales. They *talk* to each other, bats and whales, they have this special language, look . . .'

Court looked at his small son with sadness and with love; he made an effort, fighting fatigue.

'What, the bats talk to the whales? I didn't know that.'

'No.' Jonathan laughed. 'Don't be silly, Daddy. They talk to each *other*. Bats talk to bats; whales talk to whales. It's *excellent* how they do it. Look—'

Court bent to the books. His son had a touching didacticism, a longing to educate, and a passion for facts. He looked at the diagrams his son was indicating; these

diagrams explained bat radar to him, and the frequencies of bat squeaks; similar diagrams, accompanied by a barrage of information, explained the communication systems of whales. His son chattered on and Court sat quietly, holding his hand from time to time, or stroking his hair, and waiting for this room, and his son's presence, to bring him the peace it usually did.

In the recesses of his mind, images stirred; he saw dark leathery shapes flit through a jungle night; he watched lianas coil like pythons, and he saw, rearing up from this terrifying fertility, the hot mouth of some orchid-like flower. 'Oh, it torments me; Tomas, it torments me,' his wife's voice said. The words had been said many years before, when his wife had been six months pregnant with Jonathan, and had discovered that her husband's infidelities were continuing. Court could not now remember the details of that particular infidelity; he rarely could. It might have been with a man, or with a woman, and it would have been brief, for Court never had prolonged liaisons, and with the exception of his wife, who came into a completely different category, he never had the same sexual partner twice.

These sexual encounters he could walk away from without rancour or regret; they were a brief sharp need, which he could satisfy as quickly and easily as he could hunger or thirst. His wife knew – he had told her often enough – that they in no way impinged on his love for her; that love, the determining force of his life, and the inspiration for much of his work, was unchanging; it would neither alter nor diminish with time. It was one of the many mysteries of his marriage, he thought, turning a page of his son's book, that Natasha both believed in and doubted this love. Perhaps also, like him, she preferred the lightning flash of uncertainties to the long, calm summer of faithful married love. He was

not sure on that question. During the course of his marriage, he had given Natasha periods of fidelity and periods of infidelity: he had come to believe that the periods of infidelity, with all their attendant pain, insecurity and indeed torment, were the ones when their marriage was most alive to her – though he was less certain of that preference since his divorce.

‘Look, Daddy,’ Jonathan said, picking up the whale book again and turning to its photographs. He began to speak of ice floes, of the Arctic, of the unimaginable depths to which, with one flick of their vast tails, these wondrous creatures could dive, and, as he spoke, Court became a little more tranquil; into his mind eddied the memory of his wife as she had been on the day he first met her. She had already been famous; he had been unknown; he had sent her a script, and through the offices of a shared friend, she had agreed to meet him. She had come to the small, humid, cramped office he had been renting in downtown Los Angeles. He had known what was going to happen, and he knew she had also, from the moment she quietly entered the room. Her beauty had astonished him; he had been unprepared for it, even though he had seen her many times on a screen. Her hair was loose on her shoulders, her face was without make-up, and she had been wearing – he could still see its every detail – a simple, cotton, madonna-blue dress.

‘Daddy. *Daddy.*’ Jonathan tugged at his sleeve. ‘You’re not *concentrating*. I’m telling you about the *whales*. They sing to one another – it’s like singing. And they can hear one another through the water, from miles away sometimes . . .’ he smiled. ‘And you’re miles away too, Daddy.’

‘I’m sorry, darling. I just drifted away a bit. I’m tired, I expect. I was thinking about the first time I met Mommy, and how beautiful she was . . . Now.’ He looked at his watch. ‘You should be lying down, young man.

You should have been asleep hours ago. Down you go. Let me tuck you up.'

He hugged his son tight against him, some emotion he could not define welling up: a rich mixture of love, pain, loss and fear for his son – none of which could be expressed. His son, small for his age, clung to him; he felt so thin, his father thought, and so light and frail. Tears came to his eyes, and he laid his son down in the bed and tucked him in, averting his face.

'Now tell me,' he said, sitting down on the edge of the bed and taking his son's hand in his, 'what's all this about nightmares? Is something worrying you, darling?'

'A bit.' His son lowered his eyes and began to pleat the edge of his duvet. 'It's Thanksgiving soon. Mommy says we'll be living in the Conrad by then . . .'

'It's possible, darling. It's not fixed.'

'Will you be coming for Thanksgiving, Daddy? I hoped you might.'

'If you want me there, darling, I'll be there. I'll arrange it with Mommy. You know you don't need to worry about that.' He paused. 'And just think, very soon after that, we'll all be in England together – for three whole months. I'm looking forward to that.'

'I am too.' His son's face brightened, then clouded again. 'It's just . . .'

'Tell me, darling.'

'I don't really like that Conrad building, Daddy. Mommy says I'll get used to it, but it's spooky. I'll have a big room there, Mommy showed me, with all these closets for my toys, and Mommy knows this artist man, and while we're away in England, she says she'll get him to paint these animals for me, on the walls. Any animals I like . . .'

'Well, that sounds good, darling.' Court looked closely at his son. He had a small, somewhat melancholy face, expressive, with its fears and its joys easily read. He

pressed his son's hand and added, as if it were an afterthought, 'Which artist man is that?'

'He works at the theatre; he painted some of the sets for *Estella*. He made that horrible spooky room Miss Havisham has . . .' He hesitated. 'I hated that Miss Havisham. Nasty spooky old witch.'

'Well, you know there's no reason to be frightened of her,' Court said gently. 'That's just an actress playing her - and Miss Havisham doesn't exist; she's just someone made up, for a story . . .'

'I didn't like the artist man much either . . .' his son continued, in a low voice. 'I met him one day when Mommy was rehearsing. He looked at me in this funny way. He shook hands, and he had this horrible damp hand . . . He looked at Mommy too; he stared. She didn't notice, but I did.'

Court felt a quickening of alarm then, but controlled it. He would find out the man's name, he thought wearily, and get him checked out, just as he always did. But Jonathan's reaction probably meant little: it was not the first time he had expressed feelings of this sort. They were a by-product of the restrictions that encompassed him, of the bodyguards, of the constant unremitting suspicion of every male who came to the apartment, every male who lingered or approached on the street. King had imprisoned his son. Court thought, as effectively as he had imprisoned Natasha and himself, and Jonathan's fear of strange men, exacerbated by Natasha and Angelica, was a legacy he

work out; the people at the Conrad may decide to let someone else have the apartment . . .’

‘It’s very big, Daddy.’ His son clasped his hand more tightly. ‘There’s all these rooms. I thought, maybe you might come back and live there too. I wish you would . . .’

The plea in his eyes and in his voice cut Tomas to the heart. He leaned forward to kiss him, and it was a few minutes before he felt able to trust his voice.

‘We’ll have to see, my darling. These things – well, they’re complicated, you know that. Mommy likes this city more than I do, and it’s not very good for my asthma. I expect we’ll sort it all out in the end. Meanwhile, just remember how much I love you and Mommy. Now, lie back and I’ll read to you for a bit . . . Which book? This one?’

Jonathan nodded. The book, one with which Tomas Court was not familiar, was *The Secret Garden*, by Frances Hodgson Burnett. His son found the chapter he wanted and the section he wanted. The story took place in Yorkshire, he said, which was where they would all be going shortly; Court agreed that this was so. It took place in a large house, Jonathan went on; there was a little orphan girl called Mary, who was plain and sour, but got nicer as the book went on; and there was a little boy, called Colin. Colin was ill, his son explained, pointing to the paragraph where his father was to begin reading, and this section here was Jonathan’s favourite. Court could see why that might be so, as soon as he began reading. Like Jonathan, the boy in this story was isolated and troubled; the chosen chapter concerned Mary’s reaction when she awoke to the sound of Colin’s cries in a strange house at night. The girl went in search of him, Court noted, and – he found the tone sentimental – they began on a mutual process of healing.

* * *

'She knows and she doesn't know. I guess she thinks he'll come round to it.' She paused. 'And it is secure; it's a real secure building. Famous for it. Keep anybody out, that building would. I guess that's why she chose it.'

Court gave her a pale glance. The taunt under her words was obvious enough, and she made little attempt to disguise it.

'Well, it won't keep *me* out,' he replied quietly, 'not as long as my son's there, and Natasha would do well to remember that.' He turned away. 'Now, do you want these facts, or don't you?'

'Sure I do.' She paused. 'What Natasha told me, I couldn't really understand. Why all these tests and checks? It seems pretty clear to me – I mean, they found the *body* . . .'

She continued speaking for some while, and Court ened, interested to see just how accurately his explanation to his wife had been reported back. As he had expected, few details had been left out – but then Natasha had always confided in Angelica minutely. He had never had any privacy in this marriage, he thought with a flare of anger. Natasha ran to Angelica the way a good Catholic ran to the confessional; he was certain that Angelica knew Natasha's version of every one of his infidelities.

It had always seemed to him that Angelica would find them undisturbing, and just what she would expect from a member of the male sex. Angelica did not *judge*, he sometimes felt, she just watched, and very little either surprised or shocked her. He wondered now, watching her as she spoke without emotion of violent death and the details of that body in Glacier, whether Angelica knew of, and understood, the final paradox: that it was the advent of Joseph King that had cured him of the need for adulteries.

Had Angelica's keen hard mind made that

connection? He thought it probably had. He thought Angelica would have seen the link between a letter or call from King and his own haste, immediately afterwards, to get his wife back upstairs to their bedroom. He felt sometimes that Angelica had been able to see through those walls and locked doors, and that she had known, as precisely as he did, what then provoked the ensuing excitement, desperation and physical abandon.

'He's sick,' Angelica was saying now, gazing off into space, her slab of a face hard with concentration. 'He's sick and obsessed, and the way I figure it is, he went out to Montana because he knew Jonathan was there, then he finally cracked. He went out to Glacier and found a real quiet private place, and he *jumped*. Good riddance. It took him a while to die – I hope it did. I figure . . .'

Had Angelica made that connection? Court wondered, looking at her, then moving away as she continued speaking. Sometimes he felt she had not only seen the link, but pointed it out to Natasha. At other times, he felt that his wife had understood that link and had done so alone and unaided. It would not have been difficult; besides, it had seemed to him that Natasha shared his needs initially. He had been able to see a certain dark excitement in her eyes, which, on occasion, she had disguised with weeping.

'Oh, I can't bear this,' she would say, letting one of King's letters fall from her hands. 'Take me upstairs, Tomas. I want to be with you.'

Being with him was a euphemism. The instant the door had closed and they were alone, he had seen her face light; she might not admit it, but he had known that she responded as strongly as he did to promptings others might have judged perverse or transgressive.

'So he finally went over the edge,' Angelica was now saying, still frowning off into space. 'But what I don't understand is, how come he was always so well informed? How come he knew where you'd been? Where

Natasha had been? I mean, that wasn't guesswork. He must have been following. He must have been *watching* . . .'

Court turned his back to Angelica. He leaned up against a table; he could hear his wife's voice very clearly. 'He must have been *watching*, Tomas.' She closed the bedroom door, and, beginning to tremble, turned to face him. 'How else could he have known that? He must have watched you with that boy. In a *parking lot*? Tomas, how could you do that? It makes me *ache*. I can't bear – you *let* him? What did he do? Is it different when a man does that to you? Did he do it more than once? How long did it take him? Tell me . . .'

Her husband had told her. Her response, agitated and disguised, was immediate; he had been able to feel the electricity in her hands when, bolder than the boy had been, she began to touch him.

'But what I can't figure out,' Angelica was saying. 'I can't figure out *why* it *stopped*. I mean, why would he give up so suddenly? Like this has been going on five *years*, and then he ups and kills himself? How come?'

Court passed his hands across his face. He stared at a pale wall hung with watercolours. For three of those five years this new charged relationship with his wife had continued; then he had made a very foolish mistake – he had admitted, under close questioning from his wife, that for the last two and a half of those years he had had no other sexual partners; he had neither wanted nor needed them; he had desired only her, and had been faithful. She had wept in his arms with apparent joy; her bedroom door had been closed to him thereafter.

Separation had ensued; divorce had swiftly followed. In the period since the divorce – and it was nearly two years – he had remained celibate, if not in the strictest sense, at least in the sense of having no other sexual partners. He was beginning to see that this too was an error; when it was admitted to his wife, here

in this room, a week ago now, her lovely eyes had darkened with an expression of sympathy and disappointment. He had reacted as he always did: angry yet filled with longing for her, he returned to TriBeCa and lay there alone in the darkness, listening to those tapes, finding some release as he communed with ghosts and took his wife by proxy.

‘You still keeping all those King tapes?’

Angelica voiced the direct question suddenly, as if even while speaking she had been able to follow his thoughts with unerring accuracy. ‘You still listen to them the way you used to do?’

Colouring, Court kept his back to her.

‘No,’ he replied, ‘the police have most of them. I never listen to them now. I’m over that.’

‘He had you hooked.’ There was a malicious triumph in her voice; in this weakness of his she also exulted.

‘Night after night you used to listen and reread the letters. I told you then, it wasn’t healthy.’

That angered her; he saw the blood creep up into her neck and suffuse her face. Her expression became set.

'She's free of you now.'

'I wouldn't count on that.'

'She's free of King as well. She can start a new life. He's dead; he has to be *dead*. Not one call, not one letter, in nearly five months. They found that body. They found the ID with it.' Her voice had risen. 'I have to *know*, is it *finished*? Is he dead, or isn't he?'

Court gave her a long, still look. He wondered if she were aware of the duality of her own question; he thought not. She wanted to believe King was dead because, for some primitive reason, some reason buried deep in her mind, she believed that if King were dead, Natasha's marriage would similarly be dead. It was himself, he thought, as well as King that she wanted to eradicate from Natasha's future.

'The indications are that he *is* dead,' he replied, 'as you've been saying, and as I told Natasha.' He paused. 'But I don't believe he is. I believe he's very much alive . . .'

'Biding his time?' Angelica leaned forward.

'Precisely.'

'But they found the body . . .'

'They found *a* body,' Court corrected.

Giving her what Colin Lascelles would have described as one of his Prospero looks, he crossed the room. With a sigh, seating himself opposite her and speaking quietly, he began to tell her the story.

'I didn't tell Natasha this,' he began, 'but I know the place in Glacier where they found the body – and I know it well. I went there, Angelica. I went there last July first, with Jonathan, while he was staying with me in Montana. We went with a bodyguard, because I'd promised Natasha I would do that, and we took a

back-country trail. It takes you through the mountains and on down to Kintia Lake . . .’

‘You camped.’ Angelica nodded. ‘I know, Jonathan loved it there; he told me.’

‘We were away three days. It’s a very beautiful part of Glacier and it’s remote – hardly anyone uses that trail. Even in high season you can walk all day and not see a single person. We had . . .’ He hesitated, looking away and seeing the place in his mind’s eye as he spoke. ‘They were three of the best days of my life. We walked, we fished, we had cook-outs – it took me back to my childhood. We slept out under the stars; we didn’t even need the tents. We had three days and nights of perfect weather and absolute peace, and I was glad of that – for Jonathan.’

‘He’d spent months cooped up here in this city,’ he continued. ‘I wanted to show him that there’s another America; a place where he could breathe pure air, where he didn’t have to worry about telephone calls, or what the mail might bring. A place where he didn’t have to keep looking over his shoulder.’

He paused. ‘At the end of those three days, we went back to the ranch, and then, months later, when the body was found, I discovered we hadn’t been alone in Glacier. We’d been watched and followed – and someone went to considerable lengths to ensure I knew that. Do you know where they found the man’s body, Angelica? What was left of his body?’

‘By some water, in scrub. Right under this great wall of rock – that’s what you told Natasha.’

‘Yes – and that was accurate, up to a point. What I *didn’t* tell her was where that rock wall was located. The trail we took goes over it, Angelica. They found that body by the lake shore, not two hundred yards from one of our overnight camping sites. The body had been smashed up by the fall and left there to rot; and I’m certain that wasn’t accidental. It was a place where I’d

been happy, where Jonathan had been happy – and anyone watching him there could have seen how happy he was. So they took that place and they polluted it. They've certainly ensured I'll never go back there.'

'Ah, Jesus.' Angelica made one of her superstitious little signs. 'He'd followed you there, then.'

'I'm afraid there's no doubt about that, as you'll see in a minute. Wait a while. Look at the chronology. In October, the rangers patrol the park before the snows come, and it's closed for the winter. That's when the body was found; by which time, it had been lying there, they think, for around four months, in the heat of a Glacier summer. There are bears in Glacier, Angelica. You can imagine; there'd been decomposition, animal interference, some bones were missing. The only way they're going to make an identification is through dental chart records. It could take months, longer, before they find a match – if they ever do. At the moment, they're going through the records for missing persons state by state – it's slow, and it may well lead nowhere. Meantime, shortly after the body was found, I was contacted. You know why? Because someone had gone to considerable lengths to suggest an identification for that body. Someone wanted to suggest, to the police, to me, to Natasha, that the body was Joseph King's. Now, you know how careful King is, and how ingenious. How do you think he did that?'

'There was a rucksack,' Angelica said, with some eagerness. 'They found a rucksack near the remains, and in the rucksack . . .'

'In the rucksack, Angelica, or in what was left of the rucksack, was something that wouldn't decay, or rot away – something that would be preserved, and could communicate a message however long it had to lie there. There was a plastic box. A very ordinary plastic box; the kind you might use to pack sandwiches in. Only this one, of course, had rather more unusual contents.'

There was a silence. Court looked around the room, knowing he would continue, yet reluctant to do so. To speak of Joseph King, he always found, was to empower him. He could almost sense his presence now, and so, he knew, could Angelica. He saw her face tighten, and he knew she was remembering, as he did, various little packages Joseph King had despatched in the past – packages with suggestive and unpleasant contents.

‘Tell me,’ she said. She rested her large, square, ugly hands on her thighs. ‘Tell me. Was there a photograph?’

‘Yes. I’ll come on to the photograph in a moment. First of all, inside the box, there was a hunting knife; the kind you can buy in a thousand stores across America – a thin-bladed knife, the sort you use to debone animals. Then there were some shotgun cartridges, though no gun was ever found. And, just to make sure I knew that I’d been watched in Glacier, there was a T-shirt of Jonathan’s. He’d been wearing it the day we camped there by Kintia Lake; it went missing overnight, and we’d thought no more about it. He’d taken it on and off ten times that day – we’d been swimming, and we assumed it had simply been mislaid; it wasn’t. Someone had been down to our camp-site, while we were sleeping – and he wanted me to know that. He could have killed Jonathan then; that’s how close he was.’

‘That bastard.’ Angelica flushed with anger. ‘That bastard. I want to kill him . . .’

‘Wait, Angelica, that’s not all that was in the box. There was also a wilderness permit – they issue those in Glacier if you’re going to walk the longer, more dangerous trails, or if you’re going to camp out. That permit was in the name of Joseph King: issued for the same three days we were there. The home address was some street in Chicago that doesn’t exist, and never did exist.’ He paused, his voice becoming less steady. ‘And finally, Angelica, there was a photograph. Not one of

the publicity pictures of Natasha that he's used before, but a family photograph, of Natasha and Jonathan – a photograph *I* took, when Jonathan was still a baby, in the garden of that house we had years ago in California.'

'A photograph *you* took?' Angelica stared at him. 'But that's not possible . . .'

'A photograph I took over five years ago now.' Court gave a weary gesture. 'Jonathan was about eighteen months old. Natasha and I had just finished work on *The Soloist* – you remember?'

'I remember.' She looked at him in confusion. 'But I don't see – how could he get hold of it? That's got to be *before* we got any letters or calls from King . . .'

'Exactly. The police have checked; I've checked; the agency has checked. I know exactly when I took that photograph; it was two months before the first of the calls and letters from King – so we have to re-date the start of his obsession. Except, for all I know, he's got pictures I took even earlier, and he's just waiting to produce them . . .'

'But how did he *get* it? He stole it somehow?'

'No, easier than that. That photograph was the last on a reel of family pictures I took. Jonathan was walking by then, beginning to talk – Natasha loved that house . . .'

He broke off, then after a pause, continued. 'Anyway, I had it developed at the same laboratory in LA that I always used. They sent back the prints and the negatives, and I still have them – but, of course, for anyone working in that lab, it was easy enough to run off extra prints, and no-one would be any the wiser . . .'

He gave a sigh and rose to his feet. 'So, they've now launched a new set of checks: who worked at that lab then? Where they are now? There were over thirty employees who could have had access to that film. It's over five years ago. Most of them have since left the firm, moved out of state, married, changed their names, dropped out of sight . . . It's going to take *months*, yet

again, to trace them and question them. And it will probably lead nowhere. It will probably be another dead end.' He stopped abruptly. 'You know what he'd done to the picture?'

'Cut it up? Like the others?'

'Yes. He'd cut it up.' He gave an angry gesture. 'Cut it up into these neat squares, each one about a quarter of an inch. It was very precise. Natasha's face was on one little square; Jonathan's was on another. And they both had crosses on them, gouged across their faces. When I saw that . . .'

He turned away, feeling his breathing start to tighten. He could feel King's presence in the room acutely now. He felt the old helpless instinct to open doors, search closets, look for a man who was not there – and stay by his son's bedside in case he came through a locked door or a barred window.

'Don't get upset,' Angelica said, to his surprise. In this respect, of course, they were at one, he thought, turning back to look at her, and seeing on her face an expression not of hostility, but sympathy.

'Don't,' she said again. 'It *could* be him; it could be. I don't see that this proves otherwise. He's crazy. I always said he'd kill himself one day – so maybe he did. He jumped, but he had to leave one final message . . .'

'You could read it that way, and Natasha does.' With a sigh, Court returned to his chair and sat down. 'But you see, I haven't explained about the permit.'

'The permit? I don't see . . .'

'Think, Angelica. They issue those permits for a *reason*. If someone doesn't come back and check in, the rangers raise the alarm and send out a search party. They have to do that: someone could be hurt, or lying injured somewhere . . . But that didn't happen in this case. You want to know why there were no alarms, no search parties when that permit *wasn't* handed back in?

The answers are all there in the record books at the rangers' station. On Independence Day, the day the permit expired, the day Jonathan and I left Glacier, a man calling himself Joseph King rang the rangers' station. He apologized for not returning the permit, said it had slipped his mind, but he was perfectly safe and had left the park. Now, why do you think he did that, Angelica?

Angelica hesitated. 'So you'd know he was alive? Dead men don't make phone calls?'

'Partly, perhaps. But it's more than that – don't you see? He didn't *want* search parties. He didn't want the body found too soon. The sooner it was found, the easier it would be to identify, so it suited him just fine that it lay there for over four months. That's what I think, anyway.'

'But if he placed that call . . .' Angelica frowned. 'That must mean he's alive after all . . .'

'No, it doesn't. It means someone *calling* himself Joseph King placed the call. It might have been King himself; it could have been some friend. *Think*, Angelica.' Court rose again, with an impatient gesture. 'He *wanted* there to be doubts and uncertainties, don't you see? How many ways can you script this? I can think of at least five ways, straight off, and they're all equally plausible.'

There was a silence. Watching her, he saw the realization slowly dawn. She rose to her feet and looked at him uncertainly.

'Then if it isn't his body, whose is it?'

'I don't know; no-one knows. It could be his – it could equally well be someone else's. Some walker; some hitchhiker he picked up; some vagrant, even.'

'But that would mean he *had* killed someone – not just talked about it, not just threatened, but actually done it. Oh, Jesus, I see now . . .'

'It's possible, Angelica. I think that. For what it's

worth, the police also think that way, and so does the agency.'

'That bastard. That son of a bitch bastard.' The blood rushed into Angelica's face. 'So we just have to go on waiting - that's his idea? Waiting, the way we always did? That's what we have to live with? Jumping every time the phone rings, having traps on the line, checking the mail, checking the locks . . .' She drew in her breath, pressing her hand against her chest. 'That's what we have to do - go on living with the bodyguards, looking over our shoulders every minute of every live-long day, waiting for that bastard to *resurrect*?'

'It would amuse him to play Lazarus.' Court turned away to disguise his unease. 'So, yes, I'm afraid that's exactly what we have to do. We go on being careful; we go on being vigilant - for as long as it takes.'

He moved away, feeling suddenly exhausted. He looked around this pale dull room where his wife had chosen to live for the past year; his longing for her presence intensified. He began to wish that he had never had this conversation, necessary though it was. He began to wish that he was alone, and that of all the words Angelica could have used, she had not used the word 'resurrect'. That word made him deeply uneasy.

Angelica made a strange and ugly sound - a harsh, rasping intake of breath. Turning to look at her, he saw that she was trembling; the force of her animosity came off her like heat.

'I'm going to fix him, and this time I'm going to fix him *good*. There's something I have to do - it won't take long. I'll be back . . .'

She hastened from the room. Court looked at his watch. It was past eleven. Should he leave now, or stay? His wife would have only just left the theatre. She would be on her way to have dinner with Jules McKechnie, possibly alone, possibly with others; it might be hours before she came back.

He began to move about the room in an irresolute way, trying to find in it some trace of the woman he knew and loved. Its neutrality and its tastefulness appalled him. The room was white on cream on beige – a thousand permutations of colourlessness. Natasha had hung some of her own paintings, he saw – and his wife's taste in paintings was not his.

Since the divorce, she had begun to collect eighteenth- and nineteenth-century watercolours; the vaguer and washier they were, the more she liked them. Court stared at what might have been a seascape – a wash of indigo, a wash of yellow-white, some inky hieroglyphs that might have been trees, or birds, or ships.

On the opposite wall, she had hung some of her own artist mother's oils – paintings he had always refused to give house room. Natasha's mother, now dead, had been a flower-child of the Sixties, and like many children of that particular decade, never grew up. Her amateurish paintings, large and violently coloured, were all depictions of monstrous flowers, close up. Their stamens, sepals and pistils had a moistly sexual insistence; Natasha said they were powerful and reminded her of the work of Georgia O'Keeffe. To Court, who loathed O'Keeffe's work too, but could see its strengths, this proved how curiously blind his wife could be. She could see so much sometimes, yet she could also be, or affect to be, myopic. 'I will get her back. I will take her back,' he said to the throaty flower in front of him, and he began to see ways in which that might be done, if he was careful, if he scripted them correctly.

It was unbearable to remain in this room any longer, he found; its quiescence and opacity oppressed him. He could still hear his own voice, explaining uncertainties to Angelica, and the air here was filled with uncertainty, ambivalence and doubt. Also, he could now smell burning, a peculiarly unpleasant burning smell too, like

hair singed. He could hear, faintly, the sound of rustling and crackling.

He could not bear the jealous hours of waiting, he decided. He would prefer not to know how late it was when his wife returned; he would prefer not to stay here and speculate as to her activities. He went out into the corridor and paused by the entrance to the small bed-sitting room which was Angelica's. Here, the smell of burning was stronger; he could glimpse, through the open door, the cluster of crucifixes and saints' pictures and religious knickknackery with which Angelica adorned every space in which she lived.

'I cursed him,' she said, appearing in the doorway from nowhere, and startling Court. 'I cursed him – and this time I cursed him real good. I got through. I could feel it; I could feel *him*, like some fish wriggling on a hook . . .'

'Yes, well you've cursed him plenty of times before,' Court said coldly, 'and without conspicuous success.'

He looked at Angelica's flushed face; a vein stood out on her temple; her heavy body was giving off heat like an electric plate. He tried, as he had often done before, to tell himself that Angelica was an ugly, overweight, vindictive virgin of fifty-five, whose sole redeeming feature was her love for his son. She was *without powers*, he told himself, and he was the last person in the world to be impressed by the mumbo-jumbo of her semi-Catholic, semi-pagan prayers, curses and jinxes.

He told himself this, but as before, it did not convince. She muttered a few more words, lapsing as she always did, from English to her native Sicilian, to a dialect filled with liquid threat, with razor-sharp sibilants, with saints' names and obscenities intermixed.

She was trembling; the light in the hallway was poor. Court, acknowledging his fear, backed away from her.

'I *fixed* him,' she said, turning her bright black eyes on Court. 'He's starting to die right now – but slow, from

the inside out. I'm going to let him suffer awhile, and then I'm going to finish him off. I fixed him. I had him on-line. He tried to hide, but he couldn't hide from me this time. I summoned him up.'

The last phrase had a hissing sound to it. Court turned, and without speaking further, quickly left. He felt followed the instant the door closed, and he blamed Angelica and her dramatics for this. The sensation remained with him when he left the Carlyle; he could not shake it off. He decided to walk to the Conrad building, as he sometimes did at night, and it pursued him there. He stood outside the Conrad, on the north corner, looking up at the dark windows of the apartment his wife wanted – and he knew he was watched.

He swung around, staring towards the shadows and shrubbery of the park; nothing moved; no-one spoke. He looked up at a thin and sickly moon, riding high above that many-eyed roof-line, and then, some time after midnight, hailed a cab and directed it back south.

The sensation of being pursued remained. He could blame it on fatigue, on lack of food, on superstition, on the conversation with Angelica which still rippled through his mind – but he could still sense some watcher, some follower in his street; he could sense eyes as he stepped into the elevator.

Instinct, recognition, the influence of some sixth sense – whatever the explanation for that sensation of unease, he saw how timely its warnings had been as soon as the elevator doors opened.

He felt his body come alive with adrenalin shock; the door to his loft stood open, its locks smashed. He could see that in the room beyond vandalism had been at work. The lights were on; the floor was a sea of paper, and the perpetrator of this, whose identity he did not doubt for one second, was still present. He could hear that low, pedantic, murmuring, Midwestern voice, and

it was murmuring an old message. 'Under the left breast,' he heard. 'Under the left breast.'

He hesitated, flexing his hands, summoning his strength; then, with the eagerness of one greeting an old friend, a familiar not seen in a long while, he moved forward and pushed the door back.

X

'*Breeding*,' Colin's great-Aunt Emily said, with an air of getting straight to the point. She leaned forward and tapped Lindsay on the knee. Lindsay, who had been day-dreaming, jumped.

'She's bred once – will she breed *again*?' Emily asked, in a sharply interrogative manner, glancing towards Colin. For one confusing moment, Lindsay thought this particular question might refer to her.

'*Fecundity*,' Emily continued, turning back to Lindsay, and giving her a glare. 'She is unquestionably *fertile*. In my opinion, *that* is what's giving them the heebie-jeebies – bunch of old women. But, darn it, do they have a point? I want to know what you think, Lindsay. Advise me, my dear.'

Lindsay did not know what she thought. To give advice was a little difficult, as she did not have the least idea what Emily was talking about. She tried hard to think of some noncommittal reply. For at least the last ten minutes, she realized, Aunt Emily had been rattling away to Colin, and Lindsay had allowed her own attention to wander away.

She had been looking at this room, which was large and packed with a glorious accumulation of *stuff*. Some of this stuff was superb and some was tat. She had been wondering why Emily chose to put a vase of green ostrich feathers on a Hepplewhite desk; whether the magnificent portrait above the fireplace was a Sargent; whether the two strikingly beautiful women depicted in it could be related to Emily, who was strikingly plain;

and whether the grand piano in the corner was supporting fifty-five ancestral photographs in silver frames, or fifty-six.

She had also been wondering why Emily had reminded her of Miss Havisham, since she could now see that, beyond a tendency to pursue a private agenda in conversation, Emily did not resemble her in the least. This was no mad Dickensian bride, but a tall, lean woman, with a shock of white hair, bright, iris-blue eyes, and a good line in tweeds. She was wearing three pairs of spectacles on leather thongs about her neck, yet so far had used none of them; she was seated at one end of a gigantic sofa – Colin, looking nervous, was seated at the other end – and somewhere among the plenitude of its exquisite tapestry cushions there was at least one, possibly two, pug dogs. The lighting was subdued, which made the number of pugs difficult to confirm; they, or it, snuffled and snored constantly. Lindsay and Colin were drinking prudent mineral water; Aunt Emily was knocking back a serious bourbon on the rocks.

Inattention, as Rowland McGuire had often remarked, was Lindsay's besetting sin. She was always too busy examining the leaves of each tree in the forest to notice where the forest road led. With a woman like Emily, whose conversation was given to abrupt swerves, this tendency was disastrous. Emily was still waiting for a reply to her question, and Lindsay's brain was in mid-skid. Breeding? Fertility? Lindsay eyed the pug, or pugs; it came to her that Emily was discussing the breeding of dogs, or, more specifically, bitches.

'Pedigree very dubious *indeed*,' Emily now said, rattling off again, to Lindsay's relief. 'Who *sired* her? No answer to *that* question, my dear. And then there's the matter of her *fame*. She is excessively *famous*.' Emily cocked a sharp eye at Lindsay. 'What's our reaction to that, my dear? Is famous bad or good?'

Dogs could be famous, Lindsay thought – if they ~~won~~

Crufts, or something like that. Yes, she was almost sure she was on track. Emily was on the subject of dog-breeding, of pedigree, about which Lindsay, who liked only strays and mongrels, knew nothing and cared less. Still, old ladies had to be humoured. She gave Emily what she hoped was a smile of bright intelligence.

'Tricky,' she said.

'And then there's the *money* question.' Emily's face became grave, as did Lindsay's two seconds later. 'Too much money, my dear – and very *recently* acquired, or *earned*, which makes it rather worse.' She paused, eyeing Lindsay. '*Loot*. The acquisition of loot. Always a delicate subject, that. Better not investigated sometimes. As I said to Henry Foxe, Henry, where d'you think *this* came from, darn it?'

She thrust out a skinny hand and wagged a finger. On this arthritic digit was a very large diamond, Lindsay saw; it was one of the biggest rocks she had ever seen in her life.

'And d'you know what Henry said? *Tiffany's*.' Emily gave a delighted snort of laughter. 'I always admired Henry's sense of humour; very droll. In fact, Lindsay, my dear, there was a time – Lord, back in 1932 this would have been, when Henry Foxe and I . . .'

'More bourbon, Em?' Colin rose quickly to his feet.

'You are one sweet man,' said Emily. 'Don't you agree, my dear? Colin, just wave the bottle over the top.'

Colin poured an inch of bourbon into the glass. Emily declined ice and suggested he wave the bottle a bit more. Colin added another inch of bourbon, opened his mouth to speak, shut it again, and sat down with a defeated look. Lindsay eyed Emily; she gave no signs of being in the least intoxicated. *Mad*, Lindsay decided. Totally mad; barking; off the wall, and permanently out to lunch.

There was method to this madness, she suspected, however. Emily had some objective in view, she felt,

even if, for reasons of her own, she was approaching it by a peculiar and indirect route.

'So, to summarize,' Emily continued, 'she's bred once - which reminds me, my dear, You have a son, I think Colin said?'

'Yes, Tom. He's reading Modern History at Oxford now.'

'Ah, Oxford. Evidently. Delightful. I can't believe it, my dear - you look so young.'

'I married young,' Lindsay said, with some firmness.

'And divorced young, too, I hear. Quite right. If they're no good, ship them out . . . Of course, I never risked marriage myself, not that I regret it now . . . So, let me see, your son must be eighteen, nineteen?'

Lindsay sighed. She debated whether to claim Tom as a child prodigy who had gone up to Oxford aged fifteen, remembered Colin had met him and ~~debated~~ against

to hurt Colin, whose demeanour now indicated profound and desperate dejection. He shot Emily a pleading look.

'You're rambling about a bit, Em,' he said. 'I expect you feel tired. Maybe we should—'

'Nonsense, I'm just waking up. Hitting form. Besides, I haven't finished, and I want Lindsay's views on this. Where was I? Ah yes, I was summarizing – the case for the prosecution, point by damning point! Breeding, pedigree, money . . . and *fans*, of course. The fans will almost certainly present problems, my dear, don't you think?'

Fans? Lindsay, now hopelessly lost, looked up at the ceiling.

'And finally, my dear . . .' Emily had been ticking off these points on her fingers. 'Finally, we come to the single most important question of all. S-E-X, my dear – and also *love*, of course.'

Love? Lindsay began to see that dogs could not possibly be the subject of discussion here. Colin, who had blushed painfully when the words 'sex' and 'love' were used, was now staring hard at the air, in the manner of a man who believed that, if he concentrated hard enough, he could teleport himself elsewhere.

'I'm afraid I don't quite follow,' Lindsay began.

'My, dear, there is the *ex-husband*!' Emily said, as if this made everything clear. 'A most *peculiar* man – or so our spies report. Like you, my dear, if you'll forgive my saying so, she has *not* loved wisely, and she has *not* chosen well. Will she choose more wisely second time around? Can we trust her to find a suitable mate, someone who will fit in? Alas, not necessarily. She will imagine she is in love, as women do, and her judgement will be impaired . . .'

'What absolute rubbish, Em,' Colin interrupted, five seconds before Lindsay. Showing signs of recovery, he gave his aunt a combative look. 'You're in no position

to judge her first marriage, and she's far likelier to make the right choice second time around . . .'

'I agree,' said Lindsay. 'Having one's fingers burned improves the judgement no end.'

'Do you think so? What a charming pair of optimists you are.' Emily gave them a sprightly look. 'I remain dubious. The next husband – do we know the nature of the beast? No. What about lovers? There are likely to be lovers. More problems there. I foresee disturbances! I can sense them in the air . . .'

She gave a quick glance over her shoulder, then peered around the room as if disturbances might lurk here, among the crowded furniture, behind the thick folds of the curtains – or beyond the room perhaps, Lindsay thought; beyond it, in those shadowy galleries, in that womb of a staircase hall. A clock ticked softly; Emily appeared to be listening; from the plenitude of cushions came a low pugnacious growl. Lindsay, suddenly remembering the ghost of Anne Conrad, felt something cold slither along her spine.

'Did you hear something, Colin?' Emily, paling a little, cocked her head on one side.

'No, nothing. It was probably just Frobisher in the corridor.'

Colin rose, moved to the door, opened it and looked out. A cold draught issued into the room and wrapped itself around Lindsay's ankles. She shivered. Colin closed the door.

'Nothing,' he said. 'Frobisher's in her bedroom watching television – I can just hear it. You probably caught the sound of that, Em.'

'Maybe. My hearing is acute at times.' She hesitated. 'This building is full of noises, and not always sweet ones. Occasionally, it expresses its opinions and its desires. It used to frighten me when I was a child . . . Did you hear anything, Lindsay?'

'No, not exactly. But something – when your little dog

growled. And my hands – my hands feel terribly cold.’
‘You didn’t see anything, I hope?’ The question was sharp.

‘No, no. Nothing at all.’

‘Stop this, Em.’ Colin moved across to Lindsay and took her hand. ‘Stop it. You’re making Lindsay’s blood run cold.’

‘I am? I did nothing at all.’

‘Lindsay, this is my fault. I shouldn’t have told you those ghost stories at dinner . . .’

‘Perhaps. I’m susceptible to stories. I’m fine now – it’s passed, whatever it was. Where were we?’

Colin released her hand. Lindsay could sense his unease. As he crossed back to the sofa, a long silent look was exchanged between aunt and nephew; as a result of that look, and for the first time that evening, Emily was quelled. She retreated back into her nest of cushions and Colin, to Lindsay’s great relief, took charge.

‘I doubt if you’ve followed half of this,’ he said. ‘Emily can have a rather circuitous approach. Listening to you, Em, is like driving blindfold down a chicane. In fact, it’s straightforward, Lindsay. The Conrad building is a co-operative – there’s really no equivalent in England. Its board decides whether or not someone can acquire an apartment here. At the moment, one of the apartments, number three, which is directly underneath this one, is available. It used to belong to one of Emily’s oldest friends, and she died earlier this year. The woman who now wants to buy it – and we won’t name her, I think, but she’s an actress and she’s very well-known – has been pressing for a decision, because she wants to move in as soon as possible; in fact, she wants to celebrate Thanksgiving here.’

‘We’ve been given a deadline,’ Emily piped up. ‘We are not used to ultimatums. We don’t like them at all.’

‘I’d have given you an ultimatum, Em,’ Colin said,

with impatience. 'This has been dragging on for months. Bankers, stockbrokers, the IRS, references – it wouldn't surprise me if you had her medical records. It's absurd.' He turned back to Lindsay. 'Tomorrow, the decision has to be made, one way or the other. Emily is on the committee . . .'

'Along with four dithering males!' Emily cried.

'And the Henry Foxe she mentioned chairs it. But don't listen to Emily when she says "dithering"; two of those men are carved in granite, and as for Biff Holyoake – well, can you describe him as a man?'

'I adore Biff!' Emily protested. 'Biff is a sweetheart. Biff is Peter Pan on his fourth divorce . . .'

'Precisely. Say no more.'

'Biff's very pro her anyway. When the subject of orgies came up, Biff was charmed. He said, in that case she'd certainly get *his* vote. Dear Biff! Two martinis for breakfast these days, I hear, but dry in most other ways . . .'

'Orgies?' Colin and Lindsay said in unison. Colin sighed. 'I don't need to ask who raised that possibility, do I? It was you, wasn't it, Em?'

'I might have mentioned it, in passing.' Emily, showing signs of resurgence, gave a gleeful smile. 'One has to consider the worst. Remember her profession! I foresee parties, alcohol, substance abuse . . . people coming and going day and night . . . I know what goes on, you see! Frobisher fetches me the gutter press, and I pay it the very *closest* attention. I fear the worst! What about *cocaine*? Angel dust. Snow. Nose candy – I know all the terms! I think nose candy is on the cards, myself.'

'Em, please.' Colin sighed. 'In the first place, she doesn't live like that – as I've told you a thousand times. In the second, what about Biff? Biff Holyoake, to everyone's certain knowledge, has a four-hundred-dollar-a-day coke habit, and he's had it since 1952 . . .'

'Biff's mother was at Chapin with me. Biff's

grandfather was your great-grandfather's best friend. They founded . . . ' She stopped short, glancing from Colin, who was frowning, to Lindsay, who was amused.

'They founded a firm *friendship*,' she continued, her manner somewhat flustered. 'A loyal friendship. They were lifelong friends, like you and poor dear Rowland McGuire. So, so – where was I? Ah yes, Biff. Biff may be a lost soul, but he is one of *us*. He is a fine good man, and I will not have a word said against him . . .'

'Christ,' said Colin indistinctly.

'What was that, Colin?'

'Nothing.'

Colin, who had sunk his head in his hands at some point during the peroration on Biff Holyoake's ancestry, now raised it. He gave Lindsay a look of blank misery.

'You see?' he said. 'You see what I'm up against here?'

Lindsay considered. She indeed saw what Colin was up against in an obvious sense, since Emily's views were a swamp of prejudice, and arguing with her was like mud-wrestling. But she suspected Colin's words had a deeper meaning. She was still trying to work out what that might be, when Emily stirred, preened, emerged from her nest of cushions, and fixed her with a very intent look indeed.

'So, my dear,' she said, 'now you know *everything*, and I want your considered opinion: Should we admit her to the Conrad, yes or no? I feel you can help me here. I'm not young any more – but you, you also have a child, you're also divorced. You're a modern young woman, and Colin thinks you have *excellent* judgement . . .'

'He does? Thank you, Colin.'

'Of course. He admires it no end. It was Lindsay's judgement you were admiring, wasn't it, Colin? Just the other day?'

'Yes,' said Colin, somewhat fixedly.

'So there you are then. You must tell me how to vote tomorrow, Lindsay. I rely on you entirely, my dear.'

'Well, I think it's very simple,' Lindsay began. 'It seems to me that you're proposing to blackball this woman for the most appalling reasons. How can you reject someone for being a woman? Or divorced? For having earned a lot of money? For having a child?'

'Orgies, rumours, fans,' said Emily. 'Don't forget those.'

'Have your sources – I think you called them your spies – produced any evidence of anything remotely resembling orgies?'

'Well, no,' Emily replied, with deep regret. 'There remains a lack of evidence, although the enquiries have left no stone unturned.'

'I know those stones,' Lindsay said, with some asperity, 'and I know what comes out from under them when you lift them up. Surely . . .'

'I remain suspicious of the *fans* myself,' Emily bridled. 'And of journalists who, in my experience, are unprincipled people capable of insinuating themselves anywhere. Even here.'

'I am a journalist.'

'So you are, my dear, but of a very different kind. I was referring to seedy little men in mackintoshes. Scandalmongers. I'm sure you know the breed.'

There was a silence. Lindsay began to see that Emily was very far from mad – and she played a mean game of conversational tennis. The harder Lindsay hit the balls, the harder they were returned. Emily also had a rich variety of stroke play. Lindsay's volley on 'stones', low and well angled, she had thought, had been sliced back with a lot of topspin. She was losing all sympathy with Colin's Aunt Emily, Lindsay decided; amusement at her antics was ebbing fast.

In particular, she disliked the way in which Emily

insistently coupled her with this unknown woman seeking admission to the Conrad. Where were the similarities between them, beyond the fact that they both had children and were both divorced? Why all that stress on fertility, on breeding? The sensation was growing on her that, for some incomprehensible reason, it was she herself who was now on trial.

'Have you met her?' she asked now. 'You must have met her, presumably? Did you like her?'

'I have met her once. I thought her a consummate actress. As to whether I liked her, I couldn't say.'

'But you found nothing to dislike? Or distrust?'

'Not on that occasion, no.'

'Then you must admit her,' Lindsay said. 'You must see, you can't let prejudice and rumours influence you here.'

'Interesting,' said Emily.

'I *knew* you'd say that.' Colin revived. He gave Lindsay a warm smile. 'There you are, Em. Maybe you'll listen to Lindsay, since you won't listen to me.'

Lindsay at once felt encouraged; she warmed to her theme. 'The only thing is,' she continued, 'it's no good wasting your vote. So, if the other four are opposed to her, you'd have to find a way of bringing them round to your view. You only need two additional votes . . . I wonder, are the granite men against?'

'So I believe.'

'Then could you influence Biff, perhaps? I'm sure you could, by the sound of him . . .'

'Of course she could!' Colin rose, with an air of excitement. 'Biff always listens to Emily; he does whatever she tells him to do. She can twist him around her little finger. He's putty in her hands . . .'

'Colin, you are mixing your metaphors,' Emily said. 'Calm down.'

Lindsay gave Emily an appraising look. She could see it would be more productive to appeal to Emily's

power-lust – well-developed, she felt – than to her sense of fair play.

‘I don’t suppose you could influence Henry Foxe,’ she began, in a doubting tone. ‘No, almost certainly not. That’s a shame . . .’

Emily drew herself up, resentful of this slight to her powers. ‘Not impossible,’ she said, eyeing Lindsay in a thoughtful manner. ‘A woman of ingenuity might find a way . . .’

‘Really?’ Lindsay gave her an innocent look. ‘He’s not decisively against then?’

‘My dear,’ Emily drawled, ‘Henry Foxe is on the fence – which is where he’s been for most of his life. One of the problems in 1932, and if you’ll forgive my being frank, not the only one, my dear . . .’

Emily gave a slow, ribald, reptilian wink. Lindsay, startled, decided to take this as a sign of encouragement.

‘Well, I’m sure you could get him off the fence,’ she said. ‘I’m sure you could persuade him . . .’

‘Possibly.’ To Lindsay’s delight, she saw that the light of battle had begun to dawn in Emily’s eyes. ‘Henry Foxe is the kind of man who likes having his mind made up for him . . . You know the type, my dear?’

‘Yes, unfortunately, and I can’t bear them. I hate men who dither around . . .’

‘For the first thirty years of Henry’s life,’ Emily continued, still eyeing Lindsay in a thoughtful way, ‘Henry’s mother made up his mind for him, then his wife took over, for the next four decades. His wife, a tedious woman, *not* one of my dearest friends, is now *dead* . . . However, like many men – and I’m sure you’ll be equally familiar with this phenomenon, my dear – Henry Foxe requires the illusion that he has made up his own mind without assistance, especially from a mere female. So any persuasion has to be undertaken with *stealth* . . .’

‘Difficult.’ Lindsay frowned. ‘I do know the type –

only too well. I work with at least ten of them. I wonder, does he have any sense of gallantry? A spark of chivalry? That could help . . .'

'Yes, yes, yes,' cried Colin, animated again. 'That's brilliant, Lindsay. The white knight rides to the rescue of the beleaguered woman . . .'

'Chivalry, my eye,' said Emily, somewhat grumpily. 'Henry Foxe's instincts are not yours, Colin. He is not chivalric; he is *cautious* – as I discovered in 1932.'

'Reasoned argument?' Lindsay ventured.

'You jest, my dear.'

'Then I give up.' Lindsay gave a sigh and a smile. 'There's only one thing for it, you'll have to use your womanly wiles.'

This remark, not intended with any great seriousness, produced in Emily a sudden and dramatic change. Her expression became cold.

'Really? Isn't that somewhat underhand? I have never approved of such manipulations myself – one of the feminine characteristics I *least* admire . . .'

'Em.' Colin rose, his expression suddenly anxious. 'Don't be absurd. Lindsay didn't mean . . .'

'Besides . . .' Emily, ignoring him, pressed on. 'Besides – do I want to change Henry's views? I'm not at all sure that I do. Henry will almost certainly come down against . . ., in the end, and I feel he is right.'

She gave a small fretful gesture and rearranged her pug. Her feathers were ruffled, Lindsay realized, and there was now disapproval in those cold, blue, raptor eyes.

'Forgive me, my dear,' she continued, 'but I feel you are being more than a little hasty here. You seem to assume I agree with you. I don't recall saying that. This is a serious issue, after all. I have lived in the Conrad building all my life. I plan on *dying* in this building . . .'

'But I thought – you asked for my view . . .'

'My dear, you have been trying to railroad me – you, and this nephew of mine here.'

'Persuade, Em, not railroad. Look, it is getting very late, and I really think . . .'

'Am I not to be allowed my say?'

'Of course you are, Em, but . . .'

'*Festina lente*,' Emily pronounced, magnificently, turning that blue-ice gaze back upon Lindsay. 'That is and always has been the motto of this building. Do you know what it means? Colin will translate, since he had a classical education . . .'

'It means "Hasten slowly",' Colin said, his tone now openly mutinous, 'and everyone knows that. Emily, it's time for us to go . . .'

'Hasten slowly. Precisely.' Emily, still ignoring him, swept on. 'A very wise dictum, as you will appreciate, Lindsay, should you ever reach my age. Change should always be gradual – especially so in a place such as this. The Conrad is an institution, one of the last of its kind in Manhattan. It has its traditions and its standards. You can buy or manoeuvre your way into most places these days, but neither money nor manipulation will gain you admittance *here*. We do not lower the drawbridge without the most careful consideration, and we are not taken in by sweet talk and feminine wiles . . .'

She fixed her eyes on Lindsay even more intently as she made this final remark, and Lindsay found she was becoming angry.

'Consider,' Emily continued, gesturing at the room, crammed with all its costly spoils. 'This is a safe building. There may be crime on the streets of this city, but it never infiltrates here. People lead quiet lives in this building; they honour its traditions, because that is and has always been our way. It is staffed by a loyal group of people, retainers, one could say, most of whom, like the residents, have been here many, many years. They know their place. They are well remunerated, and well

cared for, and they love this building as much as I do . . . That is why, as my nephew will no doubt have pointed out to you, it is run with supreme efficiency and remains so well-preserved . . .'

'I endorsed this building from an architectural point of view, Em,' Colin interjected, his manner now also cold. 'I didn't endorse these views of yours – and you know that perfectly well.'

'I haven't finished, Colin. Please have the goodness not to interrupt. Wait your turn.' Emily fixed her gaze upon Lindsay again. 'I want your friend to understand the issues here. You see, my dear, we are like a little state here . . . or you could say, perhaps, that we are like a *family*. We have to be very careful not to admit the wrong element. By admitting into our circle the wrong type of person, we could sow the seeds of our own destruction. I have seen it happen so many times. We have to be sure that anyone we admit to our little family, not only understands our ethic, but shares it. For anyone seeking admittance, there really is only one question: Are you one of us? Do you *belong*?'

Lindsay, unlike Colin, had listened to this speech quietly and without signs of impatience. It had left her very angry indeed. She had heard this argument, or variations upon it, many times; it shored up a variety of causes, and she was in sympathy with none of them. She was now in no doubt as to why Emily had raised this whole issue; Emily evidently still suspected her of designs on Colin, and she was being told, in no uncertain terms, that if she wished to be acceptable to his great-aunt, she had better tow the line.

She looked at Emily carefully and saw that a game had been being played with her throughout the evening. Emily had treated her to an odd rag-bag of personae: there had been the Miss Havisham hauteur, the dotty aunt diversion, the dragon-lady, and the sibyl. Now Emily had morphed – and morphing was what it

resembled – yet again. She understood that Emily had been playing a game of several sets with her; now, having tested her, and manoeuvred her, and finagled her into some unwise net-play, she seemed convinced that these final hard base-line drives had won her the game. Lindsay was not sure which aspect of all this angered her most: Emily's assumptions as to her own marital intentions, or her calm conviction that, having stated her case thus, Lindsay would promptly back down.

Lindsay rose. 'We obviously think very differently,' she said, with great politeness. 'I'm sorry, but you asked for my opinion, and it hasn't changed. Now it's very late, and I've stayed far too long . . .'

'Oh dear, oh dear,' said Emily, with a sidelong glance at Colin. 'I suspect you think I'm a dreadful old reactionary, my dear.'

This was a well-timed lob; Lindsay decided to go for the overhead smash in return.

'Mistaken,' she said, 'unjust, and probably unwise.'

'Unwise, my dear?'

'Of course. All institutions have to adapt; even the Conrad. If they don't, they ossify. They become – fossilized.'

She paused. Emily had not taken either 'ossify' or 'fossilized' too kindly – and indeed, they sounded backhanded, Lindsay realized, given Emily's age. She at once regretted the terms; however strong her own feelings, she had no wish to upset a woman of eighty-five.

'Can we not agree to differ?' She held out her hand with a smile. 'I'm very glad to have seen the Conrad, and it was good of you to invite me . . .'

Good manners failed to conciliate. Emily stretched out her ossified and arthritic fingers, so the magnificent diamond flashed against the light.

'Do you know, Colin,' she remarked, her manner

peevish, as she briefly took Lindsay's hand, 'I feel rather tired. All this idealism must be exhausting me. Ring for Frobisher, will you? I think I must retire, and you must show this charming young woman back to her hotel . . . No, no, my dear, I insist. New York can be a very unsafe place at night. You need a man at your side . . .'

She took Lindsay's arm and began to guide her towards the door.

'So nice to have met you, my dear. I do hope we meet again.' She peered at Lindsay, as if trying to remember who she was. 'So many things I wanted to ask you – and I forgot; my age, you know. Let me see . . . Colin tells me you're going to write a book, I think?'

'I'm going to try, yes.'

'And move to the country too, I hear? Delightful.'

'It's what I'm hoping to do,' Lindsay began, now feeling guilty and embarrassed. Emily was morphing again, she could sense it. They were now inching towards duchess, and there were symptoms of Lady Bracknell, too.

'Lindsay thinks the country would be more economical, Em.'

'*Economical?*' Emily stared. 'In my experience, the country is always *vastly* expensive. All that nature to tame. One never *stops* writing cheques . . .'

'I'm only looking for something small,' Lindsay said, edging towards the door. 'Just a hovel, really, with . . .'

'A novel?' Emily frowned. 'You're looking for a small novel? Well, there are plenty of those these days, my dear. I have novels here – you're very welcome to borrow them. I prefer history – Gibbon, you know. I rarely read fiction, except on airplanes, when I like to get my teeth into something plump and juicy, with lots of that *very* vulgar gold lettering. Ah, here's Frobisher. Just trot along with her, my dear, and she'll help you find your coat. Perhaps you'd like to see the library on your way out? We'll discuss novels, small or otherwise,

'I *told* you that. Courage, a kind heart and the most beautiful eyes in the world. Oh *God*. Give me the verdict. Have I a hope, Em?'

'*Fossilized!*' Emily laughed again. 'I did so enjoy that. She was outraged, you know – quite pink in the face. And I'd put my argument so *well*.'

'You were intolerable. You put her in an intolerable position. Why, why, why couldn't you stick to the lines I wrote?'

'Because I'd have learned *nothing*. Instead of which, and entirely thanks to me, I've learned everything I need to know.'

'Oh sure, and she's learned to hate you. Bloody great. That's really going to help me. Well done, Em.'

'Nonsense. She'll come around; she has a generous nature, and next time I'll be on my best behaviour, I promise . . .' She paused. 'Thanksgiving?'

'Maybe.' Their eyes met. 'But I'm not sure yet. I'm having to be very, very careful. I'm not going to mess this up, and none of it's easy. I want . . .'

He hesitated. 'I just want to take her in my arms all the time.'

'So I observed.'

'Oh God, *God*. You can't have done. You don't think she noticed? When I took her hand?'

'Oddly enough, no. But then she doesn't know you as well as I do . . . Could you stop walking up and down, Colin? It's making me quite dizzy.'

'I'll have to go; she'll be waiting. Come on, Em, I want to know what you *think*.'

'We have a couple of minutes. Frobisher will keep her well out of earshot. Why can't I tell you when you get back from the Pierre? Always assuming, of course, that you *do* get back from the Pierre . . .'

'Because I have to know *now*. Em, please—'

'Have you given her the envelope yet?'

'No, I haven't. But I'm about to . . .' He stopped pacing

and his whole demeanour changed. 'Come on, Em,' he said, more quietly, 'put me out of my misery. I've made so many bloody mistakes, and this time it really matters. Am I right – yes or no?'

Emily found herself moved by his pallor and by the expression in his eyes. She knew the answer he wanted, for it was written in every line of his handsome face. Her expression became serious, and she looked at him in silence for some while.

'You're sure?' she asked at length.

'Totally.'

'You've considered the question of her age?'

'Oh, for God's *sake*, don't start on fertility *again*. It was inexcusable when you did that . . .'

'Colin, your family have lived at Shute for over four hundred years.'

'I don't bloody *care*.'

'There is the entail to consider, Colin.'

'Fuck the entail.'

Emily sighed. She saw the flash in his eyes as this statement was made and it affected her, since she had a weakness for passion and iconoclasm; she was also devoted to Colin and wished to see him happy, though in her experience, romance and contentment rarely went hand in hand.

'Colin, someone has to say this to you, so I will. She has a son approaching twenty; she may look much younger, but she must be forty at least. You are aware of the biological clock, as I believe it is called these days? Colin, do I have to spell this out to you?'

'No, I've already done those calculations.'

'And it doesn't alter your view?'

'It couldn't.' The blood washed up into his face. 'I love her, Em.'

Emily sighed. She found her nephew [†] when he looked as he did now, and she [†] loved him fondly, that many women, perhaps [†] c

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and his whole demeanour changed. 'Come on, Em,' he said, more quietly, 'put me out of my misery. I've made so many bloody mistakes, and this time it really matters. Am I right – yes or no?'

Emily found herself moved by his pallor and by the expression in his eyes. She knew the answer he wanted, for it was written in every line of his handsome face. Her expression became serious, and she looked at him in silence for some while.

'You're sure?' she asked at length.

'Totally.'

'You've considered the question of her age?'

'Oh, for God's *sake*, don't start on fertility *again*. It was inexcusable when you did that . . .'

'Colin, your family have lived at Shute for over four hundred years.'

'I don't bloody *care*.'

'There is the entail to consider, Colin.'

'Fuck the entail.'

Emily sighed. She saw the flash in his eyes as this statement was made and it affected her, since she had a weakness for passion and iconoclasm; she was also devoted to Colin and wished to see him happy, though in her experience, romance and contentment rarely went hand in hand.

'Colin, someone has to say this to you, so I will. She has a son approaching twenty; she may look much younger, but she must be forty at least. You are aware of the biological clock, as I believe it is called these days? Colin, do I have to spell this out to you?'

'No, I've already done those calculations.'

'And it doesn't alter your view?'

'It couldn't.' The blood washed up into his face. 'I love her, Em.'

Emily sighed. She found her nephew hard to resist when he looked as he did now, and she felt, looking at him fondly, that many women, perhaps even Lindsay,

might have shared this view. Colin was indeed chivalric; he rode to the lists careless of the fact that he was vulnerable, and deeply so.

'Well, well – I begin to see that,' she said quietly. 'Colin, don't say any more, it will make me sentimental, and to be sentimental, at this juncture, will be of no assistance at all.' She sighed again. 'I'm not going to give you advice. Young men in your condition rarely listen to advice, however wise. And I have to admit, I liked her. The age is a very definite drawback – though, of course, even at forty, or forty-one, there is hope . . . But in many ways, she is just what you need, and I am not blind to that. She is honest – not an ounce of calculation, I thought. Also quite smart, amusing . . . Your father would adore her, and I think she would adore him. I can even see her at Shute . . .'

'So can I.'

'You're going to have to confess. A palace is a rather different kettle of fish to a hovel, Colin dear.'

'Shute isn't a palace; it's my *home*. And I'm going to explain all that to her . . .' Colin, recovering somewhat, gave her a glance that was half-anxious, half-amused. 'I have it all planned out, Em. I told you, I'm not going to risk losing her. This is a *campaign*.'

'So I see.' She laughed. 'I also see my verdict doesn't make two cents' worth of difference. If I'd said the opposite would that have changed your mind?'

'No.'

'So resolute! Well, well, you'd better go.'

'Do I have a chance, Em?'

Emily smiled, then sighed. 'As to that, I never make predictions. She likes you, which can be a good start. I wonder – have you any rivals, though?'

'Oh *God*, I don't know. I don't *think* so. I can't believe there aren't, but she claims there's no-one . . .'

'Does she indeed?' Emily gave Colin a small glance. 'Well, you've always been good at getting your way

when it mattered, Colin. You've been smart so far, I think . . .'

'I intend to go on being smart.'

'But I'm not too sure about the platonic approach; I wouldn't overdo it. Interesting what she said about men who dithered . . . I've always felt that the great secret of seduction is knowing *when* to make your move. Now, kiss me goodnight, you wicked boy, and don't keep her waiting any longer. Full speed ahead—'

'*Festina lente*,' Colin corrected, the glint of amusement returning to his eyes. '*Festina* very *lente* for at least the next two weeks. So I'll be back in half an hour.'

In the taxi-cab – and Colin proved as expert at summoning cabs as he was at summoning waiters – Colin established a most gentlemanly three inches of seat between them. Lindsay admired this.

'I'm sorry I was so long,' Colin said. 'I just had to calm Emily down a bit. She really is worried about the decision tomorrow.'

'She's obviously going to vote against—'

'I'm afraid so.'

'Ah well. I hope I didn't upset her. I'm feeling guilty now. I hope I wasn't too sanctimonious. She's not young, and it's predictable she'd feel as she does.'

'Don't worry about it. I've given her a far harder time. She doesn't mind, and she loves a good argument. In any case, she liked you. She's just been singing your praises . . .'

'I find that hard to believe.'

'No, no, you're wrong. She thought you were very pretty. She thought you had extraordinary eyes, truly beautiful, *candid* eyes.'

'Heavens,' said Lindsay, secretly gratified.

'And then, she admired your dress sense . . .' Colin gave her a sidelong glance, suppressing a smile. 'She particularly liked that white T-shirt thing you're

wearing . . .' Lindsay, remembering Pixie's comments on that T-shirt, blushed in the darkness of the cab.

'She said she liked your voice. She said it had a most attractive catch in it. Your sense of humour, she mentioned that . . .'

'Stop. Stop. I'll get swollen-headed.'

'Oh, and when you stood up to her, held your ground – she *adored* that.'

'Are you sure, Colin? I didn't get that impression at all.'

'I warned you she was odd – you mustn't be misled by her manner. Once you know her better, you'll begin to see—' He broke off. 'That is, if you meet her again. I hope you'll come to like her. She's a very good judge of character – of everything, in fact. I never make an important decision without consulting her . . .'

'And do you take her advice?' Lindsay asked, struck by his tone.

'Not always, but I listen to her views.' He took Lindsay's hand in his. 'So, all in all, she was very glad to have met you.' He raised her hand to his lips, kissed it, then released it. 'Very glad,' he repeated.

Lindsay, thrown by that kiss on the hand, stared at him. Colin, who had been gazing out at the passing streets in an abstracted way, glanced back with a smile.

'And so, in conclusion, she hopes you weren't too . . . by a crotchety octogenarian, and that you'll visit her again before you leave New York . . . Ah, the Pierre. Here we are. I'll just see you safely in. I'll tell the cab to wait, if I may.'

Lindsay preceded him into the Pierre. She felt flurried and dazed as a result of that kiss on the hand. The cab actually was waiting, she noted, as Colin completed his negotiations with its driver; that meant that Pixie's predictions were very wide of the mark.

Realizing this, Lindsay felt a certain disappointment. She did not want Colin Lascelles to make any advances

magic unguents, of yams and papaya juice. She leaned against the closed door for several minutes, until her heart rate slowed down. A short while later, she permitted herself to read the only one of her messages of any significance. It informed her that Mr McGuire had called at 11 p.m., and would call again the following morning, at nine, New York time.

Lindsay kissed this message several times and re-scheduled her next morning's activities in her mind. She reminded herself that, when this call came through, she would rigorously observe her new womanliness and sweetness of tongue. She paced about the room in a fervour; then, discovering that only two minutes and not a lifetime had passed, she examined Colin's mysterious envelope and opened it.

Inside was a brief note, in large writing she found difficult to decipher. Eventually she made out the words: 'This place belongs to someone my father knows,' she read. 'It needs a loving tenant, I gather. Rent low. Maintenance negligible. Available now. Terms negotiable, but long let preferred. Could this be of interest? Colin.'

The style of this note surprised Lindsay, who would not have expected terseness from Colin. Having read it carefully twice, she turned to the enclosed photographs. She stared at them in disbelief, then gave a gasp of delight. They showed an old, beautiful house, of medium size, which might once have housed a farming family. It had a steep lichened roof and walls of honeyed stone. Next to it was an ancient stone barn, in front of which chickens pecked in a perfect courtyard. It had a perfect cottage garden, with hollyhocks and lavender. There was a perfect stream, flowing through a perfect orchard, and the boughs of the trees there were weighted down with ripening apples. Beyond the garden and the orchard, lay the green serenity of English fields, bathed in the gold of an English summer afternoon. 'Shute Farm,' Colin

had written on the back of one of the pictures. 'Twenty miles from Oxford.'

Lindsay could not believe her eyes. It was uncanny how closely this resembled the house of her dreams, as described several times to Colin. When she saw that, although it was not by any manner of means a hovel, it did have a rose, a crimson rose, trained around its door, she surrendered her heart to it.

She went to bed thoughtful and lay in the dark, suddenly fearful that she might dream of those ghosts at the Conrad. But her sleep was benign: she dreamed she was living in the magical house, writing an inspired biography, enjoying frequent visits from those two good friends, Colin Lascelles and Rowland McGuire. One afternoon, under those boughs of ripening apples in that orchard, Colin proposed to her again. This time, he was sober, and this time the proposal was witnessed by a silent Rowland McGuire. Lindsay was plucking an apple, and just about to give Colin her answer, when the dream took a new turn.

At the Conrad, Colin Lascelles did not even attempt sleep; in a fervour from that kiss on the cheek, in an agony of suspense as to Lindsay's reaction to the photographs, he felt it unlikely he would ever sleep again. He left Emily, together with Frobisher, to watch a late movie on television – it was one of their favourites, *Terminator II*. He retired to his own rooms at the far end of Emily's very large and labyrinthine apartment.

There, he paced up and down, tried to work, failed to work, discovered an urgent need to express himself and picked up paper and pen. He wrote a long and impassioned letter to Lindsay Drummond, baring his heart. He covered six pages in his large sprawl, reread them, found them ill-phrased and inadequate, and decided instead to write to Rowland McGuire. He penned five pages to Rowland, explaining how grateful

he felt to him for bringing the miracle of Lindsay his way, then decided in mid-sentence that this confession might be premature.

Rowland was discreet, it was true; indeed, he was one of the most discreet men Colin had ever known, remaining as reserved and silent on the subject of his own affairs as he was on those of his friends. He was, however, an old friend and colleague of Lindsay; it was not impossible they would be in communication during her stay in New York, and not entirely impossible that Rowland might let something slip in conversation. Better to wait and apprise Rowland of his hopes, fears and joys later, he decided, remembering that he had already, some days before, sent Rowland a postcard that was somewhat over-emotional in tone. He reread what he had written and found both letters weighty with adverbs. They had tried to cure Colin of adverbs at his public school; now a rash of them had broken out. There was 'deeply' and 'tenderly' and 'unbelievably' and 'eternally' just in the space of two lines.

He ripped both letters into confetti, consigned them to his metal waste-bin, then, knowing both Emily and Frobisher were capable of snooping, set fire to them. He burned his hand, scorched a fine Persian rug and filled the room with choking smoke. Waving his arms and shouting, he leaped across to the window and flung it wide open. It had begun raining; the air was chilly and a fine mist hung above the trees of Central Park. He stared out at the same moon Tomas Court had found thin and sickly, and it seemed to him enchanting, creating a silvery city, a Manhattan of monochrome. Only the constant restless surge of the city and the ceaseless panic of its sirens disturbed him. When they intruded too much into his reverie, he closed the window again and leaned against the glass, surrendering to the homesickness for Shute that was never far from him, and which now welled up in his heart.

He thought of the peace of its parkland, the grace and charm of Shute Court's south façade. Beautiful in all weathers and all lights, the great house had a particular magic by moonlight. Perhaps, he thought, he could contrive it so that Lindsay saw Shute at night and by moonlight, when he showed it to her for the first time.

A week after she moved into the estate farmhouse, perhaps? Two weeks? He wanted her to have time to fall in love with the beauties of the place, but he knew that once she was actually there, his deceptions could not be protracted too long, and the risk of accidental discovery was strong. He would have liked to take her there now, he thought; he wished that, at this very moment, they were walking hand in hand through the copse and out into the enchantment of the deer park.

Within seconds, he was seeing, then scripting, this first encounter; then he was scripting Lindsay's first meeting with his father – a little difficult this, for although Colin loved his father dearly, he knew his eccentricities were marked. Then he was introducing Lindsay to his two beloved lurcher dogs, Daphnis and Chloe; now they were in the Great Hall, now in the kitchen, and suddenly, he discovered, in his bedroom, in the peace and privacy of which room, Lindsay began to say and do the most marvellous things.

Colin lay down on his bed and closed his eyes; his imagination now beginning to gallop, he gave it a lover's free rein. He worshipped the roundness of Lindsay's breasts and the smoothness of her thighs; he discovered she possessed a loving agility; locked in each others arms, they were just moving from a long adagio of kisses and caresses towards a crescendo of desire, when the telephone rang.

Colin looked at his bedside clock, discovered it was three in the morning, and was immediately certain that only one person in the world could be telephoning now. He grabbed the telephone, waited for that wonderful

voice with a catch in it, and discovered he was listening to the very different voice of Thalia Ng.

His mind grappled with this disappointment and its detumescent effect. Gradually it began to register that Thalia, for once, was not swearing, and that she sounded both shaken and alarmed.

'I need your help,' she was saying. 'Get a cab, Colin, and come down to TriBeCa—'

'TriBeCa? Now?'

'Yes, Tomas's loft. And make it fast.'

Colin's cab dropped him on the corner of Court's street. As he turned into it, he heard voices and running feet, then the slam of a vehicle's doors. He saw that a long white unidentified van, too small to be a hospital vehicle, but possibly a private one, was pulling away from Court's building. It moved off fast, without sounding its siren, but with the blue light on its roof flashing fear out of the shadows of the street and striking panic into Colin's heart. He ran the last few yards, entered the building and, ignoring the elevator, ran fast up the stairs. The door to the loft was wide open and he could just see Thalia Ng, standing on the far side of that long black work table where they had both spent most of the preceding day.

Colin moved forward into the doorway, questions on his lips, then stopped dead as he saw the extent of the damage in the room beyond. He stared around him, in shock and bewilderment. 'Oh dear God,' he said, in a low voice. 'Christ — what's happened here?'

Thalia was supporting herself, he realized, by leaning against the table. Her face was drained of all colour and she was trembling.

'He called me,' she began, in a low unsteady voice. 'He called me an hour ago. I came straight over. I called his doctor from home, before I left, because I could tell — from his voice, the way he was breathing . . .' She

fumbled for a chair, then sat down. 'Shut the door, Colin. I need a drink – find me something. Brandy, Scotch – whatever. I don't care.'

'He doesn't drink . . .' Colin closed the door and looked around him helplessly. He took a step forward, heard glass crunch under his feet, and realized that there was blood on the floor.

'I know, but he keeps some for other people. In that cupboard over there.'

Colin made his way to the cupboard with care. His passage was blocked by up-ended, smashed chairs, by a blizzard of paper, ripped photographs and coils of cinefilm. One of the cupboard doors had been wrenched off its hinges and most of its contents lay smashed and spilled on the floor. At the back of it, he found an unopened bottle of bourbon and one wineglass. He brought these back to the table, righted a chair and sat down next to Thalia.

'Here,' he said. 'Drink it slowly—'

Thalia took a swallow, half choked, then swallowed a little more. Colin looked at her untidy frizz of grey hair and at her clothes, which had obviously been bundled on in a hurry. He realized that she was much older than he had first thought, nearer sixty than fifty, and that she had been crying. Gently, he took her hand.

'Take your time. Thalia, can I get you something else? Tea? Sweet tea? You've had a shock—'

'Tea? Are you kidding?' Some colour had returned to Thalia's face. 'You have a cigarette? I know you smoke sometimes—'

Colin hesitated, his eye caught by one of Court's asthma inhalers, lying amidst shreds of paper on the floor.

'It's OK. Tomas would forgive us, in the circumstances. Besides, he isn't here . . .'

Colin lit cigarettes for both of them. Thalia inhaled, then, to Colin's consternation, began crying again.

'I thought he was dead,' she began. 'I thought he was dead. I walked in and he was lying on the floor right there, and I thought I was too late. Oh shit.' She pulled off her glasses, and rubbed at her eyes ineffectually. Colin produced a handkerchief and handed it across. Thalia looked at this immaculate square of white linen, laughed, then began to cry again.

'I might have known you'd carry one of those. You're just so goddamn English, you know that?'

'Sorry,' said Colin, 'I do try. I just seem to revert now and then.'

Thalia laughed again and dried her eyes. She took another swallow of bourbon and another deep inhalation of her cigarette.

'You're OK,' she said at length, in a shaky voice. 'Tomas thinks so. I think so – and that's why you're here. Tomas doesn't have any friends. I couldn't call Mario, because he talks. In fact, I couldn't think of anyone who *wouldn't* talk, and then I thought of you.'

'I won't say anything.' He looked around at the chaos of the room. 'Thalia, what in God's name happened? Is Tomas all right?'

'No.' She blew her nose. 'Shit, my hands won't stop shaking.' She swallowed a little more bourbon. 'No, it's not all right. He hasn't been all right for quite some time. The asthma's worse and – there are other problems: stress, overwork, lack of sleep, anxiety.' She looked away. 'So – something happened here tonight, and I don't know what it was. There'd been a break-in, I guess. Tomas – someone had hit him. His hands were bleeding and there was this gash on his face, but the doctor said that wasn't serious . . .'

'But he'd collapsed?'

'Yes. He was semi-conscious; he couldn't speak. It was a bad asthma attack – one of the worst I've seen.' She broke off and stubbed out the cigarette, grinding it in an angry way in a broken saucer that lay among the

ripped papers on the table. 'But he's going to be OK – the doctor says so. He will be OK. Rest, medication – they'll pull him around. Meantime, I need your help. You're going to help me clean up this shit here.' She gestured around the room. 'And you're going to help me fix up a convincing cover story, because we need one, fast.'

'A cover story?' Colin looked at her in confusion. 'Why, Thalia? Shouldn't we call the police? Natasha Lawrence – have you called her, Thalia? She has to know—'

'She'll know in my good time, if at all. I don't want her involved now, and Tomas wouldn't either. As for the cops – no way. Give me another cigarette and I'll explain.'

Colin lit another cigarette for her; she drew on it, then sighed. 'You know how hard it's been for Tomas to get health insurance on this movie?' she began. 'Very hard. He had to have three different medicals. The doctors didn't like the condition he was in, and they liked it a whole lot less when they found out he was facing a tight twelve-week shooting schedule in the north of England, in winter. The insurers finally signed a week ago, but they put in a back-out clause: any worsening of his condition before the start date and they withdraw cover. You know what that means? No movie is what it means. This movie has a seventy million dollar budget – you've seen the figures. Unless Tomas is insured, the studio stands to lose most of that if he cracks up during filming; they won't risk that. No insurance, and they'll pull the plug on the entire project . . . So, no-one finds out what happened tonight, you understand?'

'Of course I understand. But Thalia, this can't work. You can't keep this sort of thing under wraps. What about the doctor tonight? The ambulance men?'

'His doctor will keep his mouth shut. He's paid to do that, and paid well. They've taken Tomas to a private

clinic so fucking discreet you'd think the CIA was running it. He's been there before. He goes in under an assumed name and he comes out under an assumed name, and if anyone there recognizes him, they get a fit of amnesia, you understand? The doctor says two or three days should do it. Then he flies back to Montana and he *stays* in Montana. I'm going to make him do that until we're ready to film. And as far as the studio is concerned, or anyone else connected with this movie is concerned – including Mario motor mouth – Tomas is in Montana now. Change of plan: he flew out there tonight – you got that?

'Will that work?'

Thalia shrugged. 'It's worked before.'

There was a silence. Colin began to understand. He began to see why there might have been those months of uncertainty as to Tomas Court's exact whereabouts. He began to see why, when he was location searching, it had sometimes proved so difficult to locate his director. He began to understand, now, the numerous occasions when, unable to reach Tomas Court himself, he had had to wait for Court to contact him.

'Thalia, how ill is he?' he asked.

'I don't know.' Her face contracted. 'I just know he's better when he's actually working. He's better when he's not breathing in all the filth in this fucking city, and he's better when he's away from that ex-wife of his, as well.'

'Why?'

'Because he loves her too much. It's like a sickness with him.' Her face took on a closed expression. She rose. 'Anyway – that isn't my business, and it certainly isn't yours. I'll call her later today and tell her Tomas had to go back out to Montana. I'll say some suit is flying out from the Coast to see him there—'

'Thalia, you can't do that. He's ill; he's in hospital – what if something happened to him?'

'It won't, and I can't think of a quicker way to bring on another attack than have her weeping by his bedside. I'm telling you, he won't want her to know. He never does—'

'Why not, for God's sake?' Colin burst out. 'Why all this secrecy? They were *married*; they have a child—'

'He doesn't like her to see him sick.' Thalia made a grimace. 'He doesn't like her to see him weak. And you know what? He's right. That woman can smell weakness in a man the way a shark scents blood in the ocean.'

'That's ridiculous. That can't be true.'

'It is true. I know her. Take it from me.'

Her tone was very certain. Colin looked at her, then sank his head in his hands. He could feel unease welling up inside him; his mind felt dazed and confused. Lack of sleep was beginning to tell on him, but he knew the problem lay deeper than that. He did not have the right kind of intelligence, or perhaps character, to understand the complexities here. Love was love, he said to himself, and he could not understand why it should be twisted into some power game. How could love be a sickness? Love seemed to him both direct and simple: he loved his father; he had loved his brother; he loved friends such as Rowland; he tried to imagine his relationship with Lindsay in terms of deceit or malaise or a power struggle and found it unimaginable. Just to prevent himself from making a declaration, from flinging himself at her feet as it were, required all his self-control. Love ought to be freely and openly given, he thought, looking around him at the chaos of this room. He could not wait to tell Lindsay the truth. Why did people feel the need to distort love with lies and evasions and pretences? Then it occurred to him that those who did so perhaps enjoyed greater success than he himself had done. His own record, of pursuit by women who proved to be interested only in his money, or of rejection from

women who preferred colder men to Colin, was no advertisement for the virtues of baring the soul.

He rose to his feet and tried to focus his mind on the realities of this room. It looked as if a fight had taken place in it, as if Tomas Court had surprised an intruder, yet the damage here, it seemed to him, was greater than any fight could explain. A fight might account for the broken chairs, smashed china and glass, but surely not for this blizzard of torn papers covering the floor, and not for a leather sofa, oozing rubberized stuffing, a sofa that someone seemed to have tried to disembowel.

He passed his hands across his face and turned back to Thalia.

'I still don't understand. What can have happened? When Tomas called you, did he explain?'

'No. He could scarcely speak. He just asked me to come over. When I got here, the door was wide open and Tomas was on the floor, like I said. There was no-one else here—'

'But who would do this? Has anything been stolen?'

'There was nothing to steal.'

'Is it just this room?'

'No.' She hesitated. 'He'd been in the bedroom too. I - I closed the door. You'll have to deal with that. I'm not going in there.'

Her tone was flat. Colin bent and picked up at random some of the papers torn and scattered at his feet. He leaned towards the light on the table and began to examine them. The first was a copy of the *New York Times* Arts section, dated a few days previously; it was folded back at an interview with Natasha Lawrence he had already seen, an anodyne piece written by someone called Genevieve Hunter, whom Lindsay had mentioned she knew. The photograph of Natasha Lawrence had been smeared with some whitish substance. The quote referring to her future home in the Hollywood hills had been circled in green ink; the words LIAR

BITCH CUNT had been written next to it in capitals.

He began to feel sick. He dropped the newspaper and examined the other fragments of paper one by one. Some he recognized as the various revised shooting schedules that had been littering the table the previous day. There were several others which concerned the Conrad building, some torn from books, others, to judge from their paper and wording, from architectural journals. Finally, there were scraps of what appeared to be letters, handwritten, again in capitals, and again in green ink. He peered at the words, which seemed to concern Natasha Lawrence and bodyguards; then he came across the first reference to animals. He crimsoned and let the scraps of paper fall.

Thalia, who had been watching him in silence, gave a gesture towards the sea of fragments covering the floor. Colin saw there were more communications in green ink, hundreds of them, perhaps more, all of them ripped and shredded and trampled upon.

'You've heard about Joseph King?' Thalia said, her face expressionless.

'Yes. Mario told me.'

'You heard he might have died, last June – killed himself maybe?'

'No, I didn't know that.'

'That was what people hoped. Those are his letters. Five years' worth of letters—'

'But he can't be dead,' Colin picked up the newspaper, then held it out to her. 'Green ink, the same writing. This paper is dated four days ago.'

'I know. I saw it before you arrived. In fact . . .' Thalia paused, 'it's partly why I called you. I got afraid. I think he's been here tonight. I think Tomas caught him in the act of going through these letters. I think he's been listening to the tapes of his phone calls as well . . .'

'Those tapes in the bedroom? Those are *his*?' Colin stared at her. 'I saw them yesterday – the door w

Thalia, why would Tomas keep them? I don't understand.'

'He likes listening to them. Don't ask me why. I wouldn't dare ask him and I prefer not to know. But those tapes were playing when I arrived and they're probably still playing now. I wasn't going to go into that room and I won't now.' She gave herself a little shake. 'So you're going to have to do it. You're going to switch the fucking thing off, then we're taking all the tapes and we're going to box them up along with the rest of this filth. Then I'm taking it all away and I'm getting it burned, which is something I should have done a long time ago . . .'

'Thalia, we can't do that; we don't have the right. This is Tomas's property, in the first place – and in the second, it's evidence. We have to call the police.'

'This stuff is killing Tomas.' She turned away. 'I've watched it poison him and I'm not watching it any more. And we *don't* call the police. We do that and this whole story's splashed across the tabloids tomorrow. There'll be reporters and photographers crawling all over this. They'll have tracked Tomas down to that clinic by tonight. Some ass-hole cop will be slipping those tapes to some contact of his, and before you know it, this shit will be all over the front pages, and the *National Enquirer* will be taking their marriage apart . . .'

'Thalia – I said call the police, not Reuters.'

'Same thing in this city.'

'Thalia, no newspaper would print this stuff.' Colin gestured towards the sea of papers. 'They *couldn't* print it – and they wouldn't. Why would they? King isn't sane, that's obvious. Who would print this kind of sick allegation?'

'You've been reading the wrong newspapers.' Thalia gave him a derisive look. 'And don't make the mistake of thinking King's just some crazy fantasist; he isn't. He likes to mix a little fact in with his fictions. You think

this would have obsessed Tomas the way it has if it was all sick lies from start to finish? No way. King's *better* than that, and a whole lot smarter. It's because Tomas knew King was telling the truth about *his* activities, that he thought he just might be telling the truth about Natasha as well.'

Colin felt that sick unease begin to rise in his stomach again. He picked up a scrap of one of the letters, then quickly let it fall.

'He couldn't have believed this – *surely* he couldn't have believed this . . . ' he began.

Thalia gave him a tired look. 'I think he believed some of it, some of the time. Maybe he even *wanted* to believe it. I'm not arguing with you about this; I'm getting rid of this stuff, the tapes *and* the letters, so you've got a straight choice: either you help me or you go.'

She sat down at the table as she said this, as if suddenly exhausted, and ran her hands through her frizz of grey hair. Colin hesitated. His instinct was still to call the police, to believe that they could bring order, justice and due punishment to whatever crime, or crimes, had been committed here. He looked at the blood splashed on the floor and the sea of incriminatory paper.

'Let me check the bedroom,' he said. 'I'll switch that tape off, then I'll decide.'

He crossed to the far end of the loft, opened the door in that bare, brutal brick wall, and moved into the corridor, feeling for the light switch. The ugly neon flickered into life; he could hear a low, level, Midwestern voice, speaking with a pedantic insistence, as soon as he opened the door.

He paused in the bedroom doorway, feeling suddenly afraid, watching the small red warning light come on above the bed. The room was tidy and apparently untouched. That brownish bed cover was uncrumpled; the pillows bore the faint impress of a head, but might have been that way before.

Although the havoc of the outer room was not repeated here, he could sense disturbance in the air. It emanated from the tape recorder and the quiet murmuring voice, and it made him feel he was breathing in contagion; he could sense it as soon as he entered, some toxicity breeding here.

He moved across to the surgical table and the large, outdated machine. He began to fumble in the half light with the machine's unfamiliar switches and dials. 'Hot, hot and moist,' said a voice, very loudly, right in his ear; he started back, realizing that by mistake he had turned up the volume control.

He backed away to the door, trying to close his mind to this spillage of words. He found the light switch and depressed it, but no light came on. He returned to the machine and bent over it, his hands now unsteady, trying to make sense of its battery of controls. He began pressing switches at random, but the twin spools continued to rotate and the voice continued speaking. 'Naked in bed,' Colin heard. He turned another dial and the voice sank to a whisper, a whisper he found more insidious and more discomfiting. 'Absolute lust, shall I tell you what she did next?' whispered the voice, and to his horror Colin found he wanted to know.

He slammed his palm against a whole row of switches, then, when that produced no effect, began a frantic search for the mains' plug. The machine's cables snaked away from the surgical table and disappeared under the bed. The electric point seemed to be at the head of the bed, under the *Dead Heat* altarpiece. He began to push and pull at the bed in order to reach behind it, but the bed, monstrosously large, monstrosously heavy, mounted on some box-like plinth, refused to move.

Abandoning this, he straightened, stared at the machine and found himself mesmerized. '*Such dexterity . . . were satisfied . . . the supervisor grossly . . . swallow them up.*' Colin watched the tape wind from the right

spool to the left. The room seemed to be growing hotter and hotter; he could feel himself being lured down some whispering corridor of words, around this corner and into room after hidden room.

He knew that the words were affecting him; his body began to stir in response to the description of acts he abhorred. He felt a giddiness, a compulsion to continue listening, then the voice made a small mistake: 'She loved it,' it pronounced with a sigh, and Colin's senses returned, for love was not the emotion being described here.

A sudden cleansing anger surged through his body. Reaching across, he grasped hold of the tape and wrenched it out of the machine. It coiled about his wrist and voided itself with a high-pitched squeaky scream. He pulled harder, and yards of the stuff spilled out like entrails; he caught hold of the machine, which proved immensely heavy, picked it up bodily and flung it down. Its casing cracked open, sparks flew, there was a blue, scorching, flashing tongue of light, a smell of burning, then a fizzling sound.

Colin returned to the main room of the loft. Thalia, who was kneeling on the floor, stuffing handfuls of papers in boxes, looked up at him.

'You'll help me?' she asked.

'I've already started. I'll find a trash can,' Colin replied.

They worked side by side, in virtual silence, for several hours. Shortly before six, Thalia telephoned Mario to cancel that morning's meeting and to inform him that Tomas Court had returned to Montana; Mario received this information without surprise.

Half an hour later, when the first thin light began to tint the sky, their task was completed. The bags and boxes of toxic waste, as Colin now thought of them, were stacked at the door awaiting disposal. Thalia was about to call the clinic, to check on Tomas Court's progress;

Colin, exhausted and troubled, was standing at the tall loft windows, watching a slow Manhattan dawn. A thin cat, he saw, was emerging from an alleyway; he watched it nose the trash cans. He was trying to think of Lindsay, and finding he could not do so here, when the telephone rang.

'Tomas never picks up. He always lets the answer-phone field the calls.' Thalia looked at him uncertainly. 'But it could be the clinic . . .'

Colin crossed to her side, feeling a sudden unease. They both waited as the telephone rang three times. The intercept kicked in. 'Leave any message after the tone,' said a tinny mechanical voice; silence ensued. Thalia gave a nervous gesture; Colin leaned close to the answering machine. He thought he could hear breathing, then a strange rhythmic sighing sound, like the sea. When the now familiar Midwestern voice finally spoke, it startled him.

'Testing, testing, testing,' said the voice. 'Just checking your machine, checking your machine . . .'

XI

'Not a nice place, that labyrinth,' Markov was saying to Lindsay, at 9.23 the same morning. 'All those sacrifices, Lindy. A definite reek of blood and bone. Even I could sense it, and Jippy didn't like it at all . . .'

Not for the first time in her life, Lindsay cursed Markov's addiction to the telephone. Since 8.55, the entire world had decided to call her. First it had been Pixie; then, on the dot of nine, Gini Lamartine, wanting to cancel Thanksgiving in Washington ('I'll call you back,' Lindsay had cried); next, Max had called and received very short shrift. There was then two minutes of agonizing silence, before the next caller proved to be that mumbling person from Lulu Sabatier's office, wanting to speak to Ms Drummond urgently.

'She's *dead*,' Lindsay cried. 'She died suddenly. Go away.'

At 9.15, it had been Markov. Lindsay had already had four minutes on the subject of the lunch he and Jippy had just finished – *retsina* and *moussaka*; delicious, but Jippy had no appetite at all – and four minutes on the palace of Knossos; she did not intend to have any more.

'Markov,' she interrupted, 'will you get off this line? I'm not *interested* in minotaurs. I told you, I'm waiting for a very important call.'

'You're insensitive, you know that, Lindy?' Markov yawned. 'Thanks to the miracles of modern technology, darling, this is your friend calling you from the other side of the world. How's Gotham City? Whose call?'

'I'm hanging up, Markov. I'm hanging up in twenty seconds . . .'

'Tell me, Lindy, just to set my heart at rest, sweetling – this call wouldn't be from a certain Rowland McGuire, would it? You remember him? The answer to every maiden's prayer? Otherwise known as Mr Blind, Mr Unobtainable and Mr Conspicuously Bad News?'

'No, it damn well isn't. It's – it's work, that's all. Go away, Markov. Ten seconds and counting . . .'

'Jippy wants a word.'

Jippy might have wanted a word, but as usual he had difficulty in pronouncing it. Desperate now, Lindsay stared at the hands of her bedside clock; she could hang up on Markov without compunction, but not Jippy – that would be too cruel. She listened to Jippy fight sounds; she saw his gentle, steady, brown-eyed gaze, that expression of dog-like fidelity; she remembered the last time she had spoken to him and felt the brush of unease. It took Jippy one and a half minutes to utter a sound.

'H-h-hell,' he said finally. Lindsay waited for the last 'o' of the greeting; it never came.

'Sorry about that.' After a pause, Markov came back on line. 'I told you, Jippy's upset. He's picking up some *baad* vibrations here . . .'

'Where?' Lindsay asked, jolted by Jippy's truncated greeting and giving a small shiver. 'Where? In Knossos? In Crete, you mean?'

'Kind of.' There was a pause; some whispering. 'Anyway, he sends love. He says, take care.'

'Listen Markov, I send you both my love too, but I'm hanging up, I have to—'

'No problems. We'll see you soon anyway. Back for Thanksgiving in Gotham City, that's the plan. I might go for a swim now. The wine-dark sea beckons . . . Give my *fond*est love to Rowland, darling. Oh, and here's *un petit* message for him. Tell him, he who hesitated has lost. Tell him, serves him *right*, because if he'd listened

to me years ago, he wouldn't be up shit creek without a compass now. And tell him Jippy says—'

'What? What?'

'Jippy says, Frailty thy name is woman.' Markov laughed. 'Bye, *mia cara*,' he added, and with his usual annoying timing, rang off.

Lindsay glared at the telephone. The trouble with gay men, she told herself, was that they did not understand women at all. They might like to think they did but they were invariably wrong.

Minutes ticked. Mr Blind, Mr Unobtainable did not call. She would give him another five minutes. Lindsay decided, at 9.40, and then she would leave.

It had taken Colin and Thalia a long time to load all the bags and boxes of toxic waste into the station wagon. Thalia announced that when she had finished with them she would be going out to the clinic to see Tomas Court; she would call Colin at the Corral later that day.

'You know that ex-wife of his is trying to buy an apartment there?' she said, standing some distance off of breath, next to the open door of her car.

Colin felt as if he were drowning, possibly in unhappiness, or confusion, or slime; he focused on the question with difficulty.

'I know. It seemed better not to mention it—'

'Wise,' said Thalia. 'With Tomas, the art is knowing when to speak and when to keep your mouth shut. He respects silence.' She frowned. 'Have you met Tomas?'

'No.'

'Well, when you do, you'll see. He's been silent for of silence a long time ago.'

Her tone was pejorative. 'Remember' Colin said.

'Sure. In her case, silence can be a weapon.' She made no further comment. Colin looked for her to disappear. He stood in the deserted street looking at darkened buildings: a steady rain had begun to fall.

was still early, not seven yet; the day seemed reluctant to begin, and the city was unusually silent. Distant, and filtered by buildings, he could just hear the growl of traffic, as if some somnolent leviathan sensed dawn and stirred.

He felt light-headed and disoriented from lack of sleep. He knew there was a cross-street less than two blocks away where he could pick up a cab, yet felt he had no idea which way to turn. He was tired, yet hyper-alert; he felt dirty and anxious to wash off all trace of King's communications from his hands; he felt afraid, and had done ever since he heard that low, oddly mocking voice come through on the answering machine.

'Testing, testing, *testing*.' He glanced over his shoulder, swung around, suddenly sensing someone behind him, as close as a shadow. There was no-one there; the street was empty. From some domain beyond the stacks of trash cans, a cat yowled.

He had to walk, he discovered, when he had already covered two blocks. He had to walk, move his body, breathe air; he had no wish to wait for a cab, or to be in a cab, or to have to speak to anyone, even to give directions. He had to walk and force the night's events out of his mind. He paused, looking back at the towers of the financial district to his south, where the light was beginning to crest the money citadels with gold. Then he set off north, swinging his arms, breathing in carbon monoxide as if it were the freshest mountain air. He skirted Little Italy, plunged on north through the charms of the West Village, and found himself in the Garment District, where the trucks were already drawn up, disgorging rails of clothes. It was winter and it was cold, yet he was pushing past diaphanous summer dresses. He brushed against something gauzy, thought of Lindsay whose professional territory this was, and felt a longing to be with her so fierce and so sudden it was like being punched in the heart.

This was where his footsteps had been leading him, he realized. Lindsay could heal him; she could rid him of this sensation – which he still had, long after leaving the chaos of Court's loft – that he was treading on broken glass.

But he could not see Lindsay as he was now. He felt dirty, coated with grime, besmirched; he could not rid himself of the sensation that Joseph King's words had got under his fingernails and were adhering to his hair. Two men, he felt, had stood in Tomas Court's bedroom a few hours before, and two men had confronted that tape recorder. One, the Colin he recognized and thought he knew, had wanted to silence that voice; the other, some *doppelgänger*, some other Colin whom he loathed and feared, liked the voice and its story. It was familiar to him, as if he and not King had determined it; he knew every twist of its plot, longed to hear its climaxes and saw, with a dark and resonant pleasure, how it must inevitably end. Which man had failed to find the switch-off mechanism? Colin thought now, quickening his pace – and was he entirely sure which of these two selves was drawing him northwards to Lindsay now?

He crossed 42nd Street, that Manhattan divide, and pressed on, the rain falling more heavily now. He was on Fifth, and approaching a gilded area of the city, although he scarcely saw the lighted windows and was blind to their promise of luxury. He did not see the furs, the exquisite shoes, or the jewels; he did not see the temptations arrayed for Thanksgiving, or sense the allure of commerce's pre-Christmas display. Blind to Saks, to Tiffany's and to Bergdorf's, he fixed his eyes on the bare trees of Central Park up ahead, crossed by the Plaza, caught the smell of the poor blinkered horses who waited there to ferry tourists, even in winter, even in rain, and finally glimpsed, up ahead of him, the dark, squat bulk of the Conrad, the bellying of its rounded turrets and the expectancy of its many dormer eyes.

How many blocks had he walked? Fifty? Sixty? More? He had lost count long ago. He stumbled into Emily's apartment, drenched to the skin. There Frobisher, who had known him all his life, fussed over him and exclaimed, but he brushed aside these ministrations; all he could think about was a bath, a shower, the cleansing effect of water and the urgency of seeing Lindsay. Pushing past Frobisher, he was waylaid by Emily, who seemed to be in a great state of excitement about something. She bombarded him with sentences; she was getting ready for the crucial board meeting; she couldn't find her pearls; she had discovered she was *wearing* her pearls; she had already spoken to Biff and Henry Foxe on the telephone, and *something was going on . . .*

'Going on? Going on?' Colin did not know what his aunt was talking about; nor, at that moment, did he care.

'What time is it? What time is it?' he said over his shoulder, hurrying on down the corridor.

'Wheels within wheels,' he heard her call after him. '*Wheels*; and I can darned well hear them turning. Frobisher, Frobisher, which purse shall I take? The lizard, or the crocodile?'

Colin slammed his door on her agitations. He went to look at his watch, a twenty-first birthday present from his father, and found he was not wearing it. He began on a frantic search, on his chest of drawers, bedside table, on the floor. Then he remembered, felt in the pocket of his coat, felt in the pocket of his masterly suit and discovered it. He peered at its dial in disbelief. Past nine? How could it be past nine? What had happened to the hours?

He plunged across to the telephone and dialled the Pierre.

'I have to see you,' he said. 'Lindsay - I have to see you this morning, *now*. Can you wait for me? I'll - I have to - I'll be with you within the hour . . .'

He thought she said yes, she would wait. He put down

the phone, turned on the shower and started pulling off his clothes. Then he realized he was uncertain what she had said. Was it yes? Was it no? Had a time been mentioned? He dived back to the phone. He punched in the numbers. It rang through to Lindsay's room, his watch told him, at precisely 9.45. Lindsay answered on the first ring.

'Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes,' she said. 'I told you. I'll be here.'

She replaced the receiver at once. Colin felt a soaring of the spirits. He pulled off his clothes, kicked the masterly dirty suit into a corner, kicked the shirt and the silk foulard tie and the handmade shoes and the socks and the boxer shorts after it. He turned the water full on. He glimpsed his own nakedness in the mirrors and stepped into the hail of the shower.

Rowland McGuire's call finally came through at 9.52. By then, those demons she fought so unsuccessfully had tormented Lindsay into a great state of nerves. Despite the fact that, of all the female characteristics with which she was richly endowed, a propensity to sit by a telephone and hope was the one she most loathed and despised, she had found herself trapped in that room at the Pierre. She was well acquainted with every inch of its carpet as she paced round and round. It was disconcerting, at exactly 9.45 – the time she had convinced herself Rowland would call – to pick up the receiver and hear a man tell her he had to see her, when the voice telling her this was the wrong voice, and the man, much as she liked him, was the wrong man.

At 9.46, having hung up on Colin, she had got herself as far as the door. By 9.47 she was back again at the bed, staring at the telephone with joy in her heart. She had just realized that if Rowland's call the night before came through at eleven New York time, it must have been placed in London at four in the morning. For a

brief instant, this fact filled her with hope. She imagined Rowland, in the dead of night, afflicted with torments similar to her own. Then she saw the obvious explanation: Rowland, who did not suffer torments, had called at 4 a.m. because he happened to have returned home then – and her swift and deadly imagination had no difficulty in seeing just why he might have returned so late, and why he had been detained.

A brief sojourn in heaven; a swift and predictable descent to hell. Will I never be free of this bondage? Lindsay thought, feeling the familiar shackles lock into place. She turned back to the door, resolving on liberty; the telephone rang, and she found all desire for liberty had gone.

She let it ring three times, out of pride, and in an attempt to calm herself. Sweet, womanly, *dulcet*, she reminded herself. She snatched up the receiver, heard Rowland's voice, and experienced, as she always did, the same fatal joy. It was short-lived. Within sentences, she saw that this conversation was stilted and unusually awkward; this panicked her; she sensed an alteration in Rowland's manner, and this panicked her more.

He was not addressing her with his usual friendly warmth; if anything, his manner was cautious and guarded, even cold. He sounded as if he were feeling his way into this conversation with care, trusting neither himself nor her. He sounded, in short, like a stranger, and not like the man she had known for three years.

Where was that usual fraternal ease, that relaxed willingness to discuss what each of them had been doing and where each had been? It was gone, utterly gone – the rules of their dialogue had changed. What could have happened in the space of just a week to effect such a change? Lindsay's mind froze over. She felt like an actor whose script had just been torn from his hand; she was left with scraps and tatters of memorized speeches

and an urgent need to improvise her way back into the scene.

It might have been easier to do that, had Rowland been giving her clear and simple cues, but she found he was not doing that. She was stranded mid-stage, unable to hear the prompter, desperate to communicate with a fellow actor who sounded as stranded and uneasy as she. She stared at the wall. What was *wrong*? Had Rowland changed or had she?

Concentrate, concentrate, she said to herself. How did this halting dialogue begin? Rowland had presaged his remarks by explaining, somewhat irritably, that he had been trying to get through since 8.55. Sounding agitated – and Rowland never sounded agitated – he had added that he had a meeting shortly and so could not talk for long.

‘I’d hoped,’ he had said, ‘to reach you last night. It would have been almost exactly a week since I last spoke to you – and we wouldn’t have been worrying about time . . .’

Time! As soon as he used the word, Lindsay started gabbling inanities. She realized that Colin Lascelles would be arriving here soon. She could hear some inexorable clock ticking; she could see its pendulum swing. It was important, it was vital, to strike the right tone, to say the right thing.

Then – what had happened then? Rowland had cut her inanities short. Had he done so in an irritable way? No. He had interrupted in a dry, even patient way, so for a second Lindsay glimpsed the man she knew.

‘I received that burst of Morse,’ he said, hesitating. ‘At least, I think I did. Lindsay—’

Then he had stopped short. Whatever he had been about to say, he seemed to find it impossible to pronounce. He was as silent as Jippy, and Lindsay panicked again. Some idiot, she thought, some *dolt* has cut us off.

‘Rowland, are you there?’ she said, now very agitated.

'Yes, I'm here.'

'Oh, thank goodness. I thought . . .'

'Can you hear me all right? You sound odd, Lindsay. You sound different. I—'

'Yes, yes. I can hear you perfectly . . .'

'You're sure?'

Why ever was he insisting on this point, Lindsay thought. It was wasting time; it was using up precious seconds.

'Yes, I hear you as clear as a bell, as if you were in the same room and standing next to me. It's just . . .'

'What?'

'Nothing. You have that meeting. I — I'm worrying about time . . .'

'Then I'll come to the point. Wasn't I supposed to be testing that famous intuition of yours?'

Rowland did not sound as if the prospect of doing so gave him amusement. He sounded oddly *formal*, Lindsay thought; and try as she would, she could not concentrate fully on what he was saying. She was beginning to worry that Colin, if unable to get through on the telephone from the desk, might come upstairs.

Rowland had continued speaking, she now realized, for some while. He had been speaking throughout this flurried reappraisal of the beginning of their conversation, and he was still speaking now. He had said, after the mention of intuition, something about a visit to Oxford, something about some don, and something about Tom. But now her need to say the right thing, the vital thing, was growing stronger and stronger. She could feel this message rising up from her heart, and the urgency of these words made them take on physical shape; they loomed larger and larger in her mind; they were large, the size of a hoarding, as tall as the Hollywood sign.

' . . . Tom's opinion,' she heard.

'I have missed you, Rowland,' said her tongue.

Lindsay clamped her hand over her mouth. She realized that this blurted remark had gone unanswered. She was listening to silence, a silence that went on too long.

‘Lindsay—’

He said her name with a sudden lift to his voice, and Lindsay, intent on retrieval, intent on glossing over that admission, an admission that had phrased itself in the wrong way, so that it sounded defensive, began babbling again.

When she said *missed*, she continued, revving up into overdrive, what Rowland must remember was how dispiriting the collections could be, and how good it always was to have a friend to unwind with at the end of a hard day. Preferably someone with little interest in fashion, such as Rowland himself . . . or, for instance, his friend Colin Lascelles.

Her eye fell on those photographs of Shute Farm, and she rushed on. Luckily for her, she continued, Colin had been a great help in this respect. They’d taken to meeting here in the bar after work . . . Oh, and last night, he’d taken her out for the most delicious dinner. Then he had shown her the Conrad, that extraordinary building, and introduced her to his aunt . . .

This speech, a long one, was not interrupted once by Rowland; it was received in absolute silence, until the moment when she mentioned Colin’s aunt. Then he did interrupt, and his next question was not warmly asked.

‘Colin introduced you to Emily?’

‘Yes, yes, yes,’ Lindsay said, accelerating again, and finding that Rowland’s *froideur*, his inexplicable *froideur*, was making her more nervous. ‘Yes, yes,’ she said; then Colin had brought her back to the Pierre and had produced these photographs.

This topic took Lindsay off on a very long explanation, involving her own future plans, her economic strategies, and finally the uncanny perfection of this house near Oxford called Shute Farm.

'Could I just get something clear?' Rowland said, his tone now arctic, interrupting this encomium as Lindsay began to rhapsodize about roses around doors. 'You're planning on moving out of London, is that correct?'

'Yes, yes. Didn't I mention that was my plan?'

'No.' There was a pause. 'You did not.'

This time his tone was so forbidding, Lindsay did not dare to speak, let alone babble.

'Shute Farm. Twenty miles from Oxford. Well, well.'

'It's the location that makes it so perfect, Rowland,' Lindsay said, confused and a little hurt that Rowland seemed displeased at her good fortune. 'It will mean I can see Tom from time to time – but it's not right on his doorstep, so he won't feel cramped. And then, it's so pretty, Rowland. It's in the middle of fields, no neighbours . . .'

'Are you sure about that?'

'There's no other cottages in the picture, Rowland, just fields. So there'll be nothing and no-one to distract me . . .'

'Possibly.' He sounded unconvinced. 'It's certainly in a very beautiful part of the country.'

'Oh, you mean you know it, Rowland? From when you were at Oxford?'

'Yes, I used to drive out that way often. I know it well. And who did you say this place belongs to?'

Colin's father knows? I see. And it's available? The rent is low?'

'I think so. Colin's coming over to explain all the details today. He'll be here any minute, in fact—'

'Ah. Well, don't let me detain you.'

'No, no. He's coming up here – I know he'd love a word with you.'

'Somehow I doubt that. And I don't have time.'

'It really is the most beautiful house, Rowland. It's everything I dreamed about,' Lindsay said, still puzzled by his critical tone. 'If it does work out, will you come

and see it? I'd like that. You could come over one day for a meal with Colin . . .'

'With Colin? That should prove diverting, to say the least.'

'Rowland, is something wrong? I don't understand. You sound so – I expect I'm making you late for your meeting.'

'Lateness is certainly on my mind.'

'I don't want you to miss it, Rowland—'

'I have a feeling I've already missed it.'

'Rowland, you could sound a bit more encouraging, you know.' Lindsay hesitated, disappointment welling inside her. 'I thought you'd be pleased. It was so kind of Colin to help. He's obviously gone to a lot of trouble . . .'

'Oh, I agree.'

'He is your friend, Rowland. I was – well, I was a bit worried about the money side of things, and . . .'

'With good cause.'

'I'm sorry?' Lindsay felt a sudden distress. 'Rowland, don't be disparaging. I know I haven't planned all of this as well as I might have done – and that book contract isn't marvellous, but I am trying to do my best . . .'

'No, the contract isn't marvellous, and any fool could have told you not to sign it. I suppose that one of these days you'll learn to stand up for yourself on the money front. I certainly hope so, because that publisher has taken you for a ride.'

'Rowland—'

'You do realize, do you, that there's no way you can live on that kind of advance? It's going to take you two years, probably three, to write this damn book, and that advance won't pay your electricity bills . . .'

'Yes it will. Wait a moment, Rowland—' Lindsay, feeling her temper begin to rise, struggled to control it. *Dulcet* she reminded herself. 'I don't think you can have been listening,' she continued. 'I told you – it v . . .'

'Something you need to discuss with Tom?' Lindsay frowned. 'Well, of course, I know he'd be delighted to see you. Katya would too.'

'I'd rather Katya wasn't there actually. I wanted to talk to Tom alone.'

There was a silence; Rowland had spoken with emphasis. Lindsay felt a flicker of unease.

'You don't want Katya to be there?' She hesitated, feeling suddenly afraid. 'I don't understand. Rowland, does this concern Katya in some way?'

'You could put it like that. I want to make Tom understand that—'

'Tom loves Katya.' Lindsay spoke in a flat voice, panic rising. 'He adores her. They've been together nearly three years. She's the fixed point of his life, Rowland . . .'

'Precisely. I know that. Which is why—'

'Oh God. She wrote to you, didn't she? You told me and I thought no more about it.' Lindsay's voice became unsteady. 'I can't believe this. Rowland — wait . . .'

In a second, a score of past incidents flashed before her eyes. She saw all those occasions when Katya glanced at Rowland as she made some provocative remark; all the occasions when Katya had tried to monopolize Rowland in argument; all the occasions . . . she had watched Katya mask attraction with antagonism, and had done nothing, assuming that Katya's fascination with Rowland was harmless, that it would vanish eventually of its own accord.

'So what's happened?' she heard herself say. 'Has she written to you again? Have you seen her? Rowland — you haven't encouraged her, surely? She's nineteen years old. She's young enough to be your daughter—'

'I'm aware of Katya's age.' Rowland's voice had become curt. 'Lindsay, will you listen to me? For the whole of this past week I've — damn it, this is impossible on the telephone . . .' Lindsay could hear the emotion

in his voice then, and the urgency; it spoke volumes and it made her afraid.

'Oh, I can't believe this, I *can't*,' she burst out. 'Rowland, how can you even *consider* such a thing? How far has this gone? You realize what this will do to Tom, do you? He admires you so much – he looks up to you. Rowland, if you've been anywhere near Katya, if you've flirted with her, I'll never forgive you. For God's sake, aren't there enough obliging women in London? She's Tom's *girlfriend*. Don't you *dare* go running to my son with that kind of problem . . .'

'Have you finished?'

'No, I damn well haven't. What are you proposing to say to him, Rowland?'

'I'm not proposing to say anything now. I'll forget the entire fucking idea. Jesus Christ, I don't believe this . . . I'm going to hang up—'

'No, you won't. You'll explain and explain now. What's happened? It's something serious, I can tell from your voice . . .'

'*Nothing's* happened. You expect me to answer that kind of accusation? You think I'm that kind of man? What in God's name has got into you?'

'Yes, I damn well do expect you to answer. I can hear it – you're hiding something. You said you had to talk to Tom alone. You said it concerned Katya . . .'

'Damn it, I didn't say that. Do you *never* listen? Fine. Just for the record, Lindsay, and to set your mind at rest, I'll spell it out to you. No, I wouldn't set out to seduce or encourage a nineteen-year-old girl who happens to live with a young man I like and admire. No, I wouldn't encourage her in any way if I had the slightest suspicion that she was interested in me. And, finally, *finally*, Lindsay, if such a situation arose, the very last thing I'd do is run with the problem to a volatile boy half my age.' He paused. 'I'd have thought you might have known that. The fact that you clearly don't hurts

me more than I can say.' He paused again. 'In fact, it makes me so fucking angry, I don't even know why I'm continuing this conversation, so—'

'Wait. Don't hang up. Rowland, listen—' Lindsay hesitated, feeling a rising tide of shame and distress. 'I'm sorry. I'm sorry if I jumped to the wrong conclusions, but you sounded – I still don't understand. Why did you want to see Tom?'

'I told you. I won't be making that visit now. It's not really your concern – but Tom's reading History, and it was history I wanted his opinion on; ancient history at that. As to how you think I sounded – no doubt it's the strain of having a conversation with you. For what it's worth, Lindsay, you're one of the stupidest women I've ever known. You leap to conclusions; you don't listen half the time; you're so wrapped up in your own plans, and your own activities, that you never notice what other people are thinking or saying, let alone feeling . . .'

'Wait – Rowland. That's not true—'

'I'd like to know, before I ring off, just what possible justification you think you have for what you've just said to me. In all the time you've known me, have I ever behaved in that way?'

'No. Maybe not . . .'

 Lindsay hesitated. 'But if we're going to be honest, you have a certain reputation, Rowland, you know.'

'Do I? I see.' He gave a sigh. 'And you believe the gossip you hear. Well, that's good to know. So much for *your* loyalty, Lindsay.'

'That's not fair either,' Lindsay said, fighting tears. 'I've always – Rowland, please, I've said I'm sorry. I was upset and I was confused. You'd been so harsh about all my plans. You sounded so strange . . .'

'I may have sounded harsh, but what I said was accurate.'

'You talk *down* to me, Rowland. You do it all the time. I don't understand why you do that . . .'

Lindsay paused, fighting to steady her voice. She had begun to cry.

'You tell me I'm stupid and disloyal and incompetent, and I get to the stage where I can't think clearly any more . . .'

'You *never* think clearly, and your failures in that respect have nothing to do with me.'

'You see? You're doing it again. Why? I've tried to apologize. You've done it right from the start of this conversation. Everything I do is wrong. Why? My plans aren't that bad. Colin says—'

'I don't damn well want to *hear* what Colin has to say,' Rowland shouted, losing his temper as suddenly as she had done. 'Learn to stand on your own two feet for once in your life . . .'

'What?' Lindsay had begun to tremble with misery and anger. 'How can you say that? What do you think I was doing when I spent twenty years bringing up my son on my own? What do you think I'm trying to do *now*, Rowland? Don't you shout at me. Anyone would think you were my father the way you talk to me. Do this, don't do that . . .'

'Your father? Thanks. I can imagine only one worse fate than being your father. I'm going. I've had more than enough of this conversation. I have better things to do with my time . . .'

'I agree. Just fuck off, Rowland. I'm sick of your preaching. Don't talk to me about not listening to other people, or not noticing what they're feeling. You do it the whole bloody time . . .'

'Oh, go to hell,' said Rowland, and slammed down the phone.

Twenty minutes after that, Lindsay was lying on her bed and Colin was lying beside her. Colin, whose perceptions of that morning's events were jagg—test, was not sure how he came to be there, but ne—

he knew it was the right, the only place. A trajectory begun in TriBeCa some four hours earlier had now completed its course; the laws of dynamics had determined that he had to be here, with Lindsay in his arms, and nowhere else.

He had walked to the Pierre from the Conrad, as not one cab in New York seemed to be free; he had been soaked to the skin for the second time that day, but since Lindsay did not seem to mind that his clothes were wet, neither did he.

'Don't cry, Lindsay. Dear Lindsay, you mustn't cry. Come here,' Colin said, as he had already said several times before. He drew Lindsay closer into his arms, so she could weep against his wet shoulder. Every so often, he produced another of the beautiful linen handkerchiefs that Thalia had mocked and dried Lindsay's eyes. Lindsay, who had poured out the whole story of Rowland's telephone call to him, would thank him, attempt to calm herself and then weep some more.

'I am so bloody miserable,' she said now, in an indistinct voice, into damp Brooks Brothers cotton. 'I'm sorry about this, Colin. I'd quite like to die, but I may recover if I weep for the next week.'

'You can cry on my shoulder for the next *month*,' Colin said, feeling rapturously happy. 'For the next *year*.'

'He said such wounding things . . .' Lindsay continued, wiping her eyes. 'And the worst part of it is — they were all *true*, every one of them.'

'I know.' Colin sighed. 'There's always a vile accuracy about a dressing-down from Rowland. I've had a few. Was he cold? Something happens to his voice, have you noticed? It's not just *what* he says, it's the *way* he says it. It makes one want to shrivel up and die.'

'I was horrible back.' Lindsay made a moaning sound. 'I made all those awful accusations. I told him he had a reputation.'

'So he does. It's rather longer than your average arm.'

'I told him he was patronizing.'

'Quite right. He can be patronizing.'

'I told him he was pompous.'

'Oh dear.'

'I told him to fuck off, Colin . . .'

'Nothing wrong with that. I frequently do.'

'He was so scathing about that contract I'd signed. Colin, he made me feel such a fool.'

'Well, it wasn't a *great* contract,' Colin said gently, 'but you'll manage, I'm sure.'

'I told him all about that lovely house you'd found and how excited I was. I thought he'd be pleased, but he wasn't. He just got colder and colder, and more and more sarcastic . . .'

Colin gave another sigh. He could imagine Rowland's reaction, since Rowland knew Shute Farm well, and Rowland did not take kindly to duplicity. He knew that, given Rowland's character, there would be consequences for himself. He could predict them precisely and he knew precisely how he intended to deal with them. On another occasion, the thought of facing Rowland's ire might have alarmed him; not now. Now he was here in Lindsay's arms, he felt he could have dealt with the devil himself.

He began to stroke Lindsay's hair and then her back – something he had been longing to do since she first burst into tears and he took her in his arms. Lindsay's hair, soft but resilient, smelled of rosemary. In her uppermost ear, she was wearing a small gold ear-ring, with a jade teardrop. Colin found he wanted to kiss her hair, and her ear, which was small and delicate.

Lindsay tensed as he began to stroke her; then, soothed by the stroking, she relaxed. 'Shall I tell you the worst thing he said?' She turned her head to look at Colin, her eyes brimming with tears. 'It hurt me so much. He said I was childish. He said I acted like a child

— and I thought that wasn't fair. I wasn't childish when I was bringing up Tom — and I thought Rowland would have known that.'

More tears spilled down her cheeks and Colin resisted the impulse to kiss them away. 'But he's right,' she went on. 'It hurts to admit it, but he's *right*. I don't understand why it is — I'm not childish when I work. I can run a department, do my work, and do it well. I feel confident then — but outside of that . . . I just mess everything up. I try and reorganize my life, and Rowland's right, I've done it in the stupidest way. I swear I'll never act on impulse again, and then I do. I lose my temper, just like *that*; I sign bad contracts; I run away from things; I can't make the simplest decisions sometimes—'

'Give me an example. Tell me a decision you need to make.'

'Well, Thanksgiving, for instance; that ought to be easy enough. I was going to Washington, but that looks unlikely now. I could stay in New York. I did think of going back to England. I change my mind five times a day . . .'

'That's easily settled. Stay in New York and spend Thanksgiving with me. I'd like that.'

'Do you mean that?' She turned to look at him. 'I think you do. All right, that would be nice. Thank you, Colin.'

'Anything else I can sort out for you?'

'Oh, just my life. Just my life. Just my life.' Lindsay looked up from his shoulder and gave him a wan smile.

'Listen . . .'

Colin dried the last tears, kissed her forehead and positioned her so that she was more comfortably cradled in his arms. 'You don't want to take what Rowland says too much to heart. He's always had a fiendish temper; he won't have meant all he said. He can be gentle and understanding as well, you know—'

'I know that. And he did mean it, I could tell.'

'If it's any consolation, I'm an equally hopeless case

– much worse, in fact. Rowland reminds me of that from time to time, and if I'm in a bad mood, I remind him of the mistakes *he's* made; there are plenty of them. We do all make them, Lindsay – you're not alone.'

He paused. 'Shall I tell you how I started messing up my life? It was when my brother died. I had an elder brother, Edward, whom I loved very much. Edward was – well, he was everything I wasn't, everything I'd have liked to be. He was brilliant at school – he took a First at Oxford – he was effortlessly clever, very funny, and very kind. I adored him – everyone did. And my father – my father worshipped him.' He hesitated, then gave a sigh. 'My father's a good man – he was always gentle and encouraging to me as I limped along behind Edward, but I always knew it was Edward he loved the most.' He looked down at Lindsay. 'When you love someone, when you care more about that person than anyone else on earth, it can't be hidden, don't you think? It shows in the eyes.'

'Maybe.' Lindsay, who had stopped crying, took his hand in hers. 'Go on, Colin.'

'Well, Edward was killed in a car crash, just before I went up to Oxford. I can't really talk about this, even now, but what it did to my father was terrible; he aged overnight. It broke him inside. You'd never know that, if you met him, because he's very proud, for one thing, and very much old school in his views. Men should never show emotion, you know.'

'I do.'

'I was never like that – which was one of the problems – but after Edward died, I made myself this vow: I'd become Edward; I'd give my father back the son he'd lost . . . I knew it would be hard, but I told myself that if I worked at it every day, if I threw myself into my studies at Oxford, I might get some of the way . . . And you know what happened?' He gave her a sad smile. 'All those fine resolutions – they lasted about five weeks.'

Then, when I saw it wasn't working, I went to the opposite extreme: I stopped doing any work at all, I never went to lectures, I hung around with a stupid crowd of people I didn't even like, and I drank. I drank all the time. I was drunk by ten o'clock in the morning and I made sure I stayed drunk all day.' He shrugged. 'They'd have thrown me out, in due course. They're tolerant at Oxford, amazingly so. They knew the circumstances and perhaps they made allowances, I don't know. But I was going out of my way to get sent down and they'd have obliged me in the end. Then I met Rowland—'

'And it was Rowland who helped you?'

'Yes.' Colin made a face. 'In a very grim sort of way. No sympathy; no indulgences, but he made me see — it was *my* choice: sink or swim. I tried very hard to shift the responsibility onto his shoulders, of course . . .' He gave Lindsay a half amused glance. 'And I still do from time to time. But he wasn't having that, so, gradually, I learned. I came to admire him. He could make me laugh — he could be dry, even then. He was a hard taskmaster, but I wanted his approval so I reformed, in the end.' He glanced towards Lindsay.

'I know what you're thinking: Rowland's my replacement brother — it's obvious, I know. And Rowland's never pointed that out to me, which is his supreme compliment, I always feel. He never rubs in the fact that I can't get through life without a brother figure, without a prop of some kind . . .'

'Colin, *everyone* needs props sometimes.' Feeling a rush of affection for him, Lindsay sat up and drew Colin to face her. 'Even Rowland does sometimes, I expect, and I don't believe that Rowland thinks you use him as a crutch. Besides, who's propping me up now, and doing it very well? You underestimate yourself, Colin, and you put yourself down, you know.'

She looked directly into his eyes as she said this; her

expression was so gentle, and so filled with conviction, that Colin was almost overcome. The desire to kiss her intensified.

'Perhaps we're both guilty of that,' he said, drawing her down beside him again. 'I feel very much as you do. I'm reasonably good at my job, but outside of that, I feel muddled and ineffectual most of the time. I over-react, or I fail to react, or I react much too late, or too soon . . .' He took her hand in his. 'I always feel as if – oh, I don't know – as if I'm running for the last bus, and just as I draw close enough to jump on board, it pulls away – and all the passengers laugh.' He paused. 'Even if I caught it, it would probably turn out to be the wrong bus, going in the wrong direction. Everyone else always seems to know which bus to catch, and when it runs. Half the time, I can't even read the fucking timetable.' He smiled.

Lindsay was moved by the way he spoke. She turned towards him, inside the circle of his arms.

'Why do you think that?' she said. 'I'm sure it isn't true. You could catch any bus you wanted, Colin, any time. You're funny and clever and kind . . .'

'So are you.' Colin's voice became unsteady. 'You're all those things and more. You have beautiful eyes and beautiful hair, and a beautiful voice. If it's any consolation, which it probably isn't, I watched you with Tom in Oxford. I couldn't help watching you, because I couldn't take my eyes off you. I didn't think you were childish, not remotely so. I could see you were sad about something. I think now – well, I think that in some ways you are childlike, which is a very different thing, and a good thing. I also think you're very womanly. I can't look at you without . . . You are – Lindsay, you make me . . .'

'Oh God,' said Lindsay, seeing what was about to happen next.

'Please keep still,' Colin said, with sudden firmness.

'I'm going to kiss you. Don't argue. Don't move an inch. Stay still.'

To her own surprise, Lindsay obeyed him. He looked at her for a long while, tilting her face to his and stroking her hair. Then, with great gentleness, he rested his lips against hers. Lindsay closed her eyes tight. The kiss, so gentle to begin with, became prolonged. It could not escape her notice that, for a man who claimed always to miss metaphorical buses, he kissed alarmingly well.

When this first kiss finally ended and Lindsay had steadied her voice, she told him so. Colin smiled again and kissed her again, and Lindsay discovered she liked the taste of his mouth; she liked what he did with his mouth, and she also liked what he began to do with his hands. It was gentle, adept and very determined.

'You have the most beautiful breasts,' he said, undoing her blouse – something Lindsay discovered she was prepared to let him do without protest or demur.

'You are lovely,' he said, kissing each nipple in turn. 'And I have wanted to do this ever since I first walked into that room in Oxford and saw you. I may have had the mother of all hangovers, and my brain may not have been functioning too well, but the rest of my senses were.'

'Then?' Lindsay said, knowing she was flattered by this revelation, but excusing this as a weakness of her sex.

'Then and since,' he replied. 'In the restaurant last night. At Emily's. When I had to leave you here last night. I find it very hard indeed to look at you and not think about making love to you. No doubt that's very bad. Oh, you're wearing stockings. I hoped you might be. Do you know what stockings do to a man?'

'I can *feel* what they're doing to a man,' Lindsay said, catching that glint of amusement in his eyes. She found herself beginning to smile, then stopping, hesitating, then touching him.

His response was immediate: a sharp intake of breath, an involuntary leaping of his flesh against her hand. He clasped her against him, and it was perhaps then that she decided. The 'yes' came into her mind when she saw his physical need, saw his desire and her own power to assuage it, and realized that she could give pleasure as well as receive it. It had been too long, she thought, since she had last experienced a simplicity of that kind.

'Oh God, what am I doing?' she said, with a smile, reaching for his shirt buttons.

'It looks to me as if you're removing my shirt,' Colin said. 'I'd like it very much if you removed the rest of my clothes as well.'

'Are you sure this is a good idea?' she continued, undoing his belt and the zip of his jeans. Colin guided her hand, at which point Lindsay, who had been in little doubt anyway, realized just how good an idea this was.

'Colin?' she said, some while later.

'Mmmm?'

'I think I'd better warn you - I'm out of practice at this.'

'I'm not.'

'So I see.'

There was a long silence, while Colin demonstrated the truth of his last statement. Lindsay discovered that she was losing her residual control.

'Colin,' she began again, in a somewhat shaken, husky voice, as he lifted his head from between her thighs, having given her revelatory pleasure. 'Yes?' he replied, in a distracted way, kissing her stomach, then her breasts, and moving so that Lindsay could close her hand around his cock.

'Colin - we could stop this now.'

'No, dear Lindsay, we could not.'

'Wait a minute. I have to ask you something. Do you like me, Colin?'

'Yes. This bit of you especially. This bit I love.'

'Listen, I like you too . . .'

'There?'

'Especially there. But – listen. I don't want to stop liking you, or you me, and sometimes sex has that effect.'

'If you imagine', Colin said, with great firmness, 'that I'm going to discuss that now, you must be mad. Now be quiet. Open your legs. Is that nice?'

'It's amazing. I—'

'Oh, bloody *hell*. I don't have any condoms.'

'I'm on the pill.' Lindsay kissed him. 'I don't have any sexually communicable diseases . . .'

'Neither do I.'

'In that case—'

'I agree.'

'Colin, as long as you understand – it's so long since I've done this that I'm practically a virgin. I'm practically a nun . . .'

'I find that an encouragement,' he said, with a lift of one diabolic eyebrow. 'Especially the nun.'

'As long as you're sure. I—'

Colin saw there was only one thing for it. He silenced her with a kiss; shortly afterwards, and as he had suspected might be the case, she began to demonstrate a response and a proficiency unlikely to be found in a nun; and although not silent, she stopped talking as well.

Some time later, Colin disentangled himself from her arms with the greatest reluctance. He went into the bathroom, closed the door and stared rapturously at the air. He turned on all the taps to drown the sound of his voice, and told the taps and the walls and the bath how much he loved Lindsay.

When he had done this several times, and felt he had got it out of his system, so there was no danger of his saying it to Lindsay herself – *festina lente*, after all – he returned to the bedroom. As soon as he saw Lindsay lying back against the pillows, her skin rosy and her hair damp from their exertions, he felt that since he had

scrambled his schedule anyway, and just performed an act he had intended not to risk attempting for at least two weeks, he might as well admit the truth.

He was about to do so, indeed it was hard for him to look at her and *not* do so, when he remembered those occasions in his past when such lack of caution had served him ill.

He began to walk about the room, and slowly a terrible uncertainty, a terrible post-coital misery settled about him. What if Lindsay never came to reciprocate his feelings? What if she were regretting their love-making right now? He began to see that it was possible, even probable, that Lindsay would never let him make love to her again. He groaned aloud.

'I need a cigarette,' he said. 'I need two. *Four*.'

'That's all right.' Lindsay smiled and stretched. 'You can give me one as well.'

'You don't smoke.'

'I need one now. I'm feeling overcome.'

Colin found 'overcome' encouraging. He lit two cigarettes and returned to the bed. Lindsay curled up like a cat in the crook of his arm. She puffed, coughed, and gave up. Colin stared hard at the wall opposite. Do not mention love, said a stern admonitory voice in his mind; don't use that word under any circumstances; no sneaking it in; play it cool.

'That wasn't very good,' Colin burst out. 'In fact, it was disastrous. It was an unmitigated disaster, from beginning to end.'

'Was it?' Lindsay smiled and curled closer. 'I thought it was wonderful. I enjoyed it. The beginning, and the middle, and the end.'

'You didn't come,' Colin said, in the tones of one approaching the scaffold, 'and I came too soon. Oh God, *God*.'

'I very nearly did,' Lindsay said, in a comfortable way. 'I was only about two millimetres off. And I didn't think

you came too soon; I think you came at exactly the right moment. One can't always synchronize, and it felt so good when you did.'

'It makes it worse if you're kind.'

'I'm not being kind, I'm telling you the truth. And it was the first time.'

'That's true.' Colin's demeanour brightened. He found he did not need the cigarette; in fact, he decided, he would never need one again. He abandoned it and took Lindsay in his arms. Her eyes dazzled him. Don't even *think* about saying it, said that voice in his mind.

'I expect it's me,' Lindsay sighed. 'I expect I was a disappointment.'

'You're mad.'

'I have stretch marks on my stomach; I expect they put you off. Tom's nearly twenty and I *still* have stretch marks.'

'Where?'

'There, and there, and there.'

Lindsay indicated some faint silvery lines. Colin began to kiss them. 'You're beautiful,' he said. 'I love your stretch marks. I love every single one of them . . .' Be very, very careful, said the voice in his mind.

'I expect my rhythms weren't very good,' Lindsay went on in a doleful voice. 'I told you I was out of practice. You went into this amazing sort of tango sequence and I was still doing the waltz.'

'Oh, God, *God*. I wasn't giving you the right signals . . .'

'Oh God. I wasn't picking them up . . .'

There was a small silence. Colin stopped kissing the stretch marks and looked up. Lindsay smiled; he smiled. His diabolic eyebrows rose in two quizzical peaks. Lindsay kissed them. She kissed his marvellous hair. That now familiar warmth and amusement returned to Colin's eyes.

'You're teasing me,' he said. 'You're sending me up.'

'I most certainly am.'

'I love you when you do that,' Colin said. At which point the admonitory presence in his mind washed its hands of him and gave up in disgust.

Dalliance ensued. During the dalliance, Colin suggested that in view of Lindsay's comments on making love for the first time with a new partner, a second experiment might be wise. Lindsay agreed. After this, they slept in each other's arms very peacefully for a while; on waking, they discovered that Colin did not have to work that day, and Lindsay, who had been going to begin her Chanel research, could put it off with no problems at all.

They lay side by side, talking quietly and companionably. Lindsay, feeling at peace, realized that she was happier than she had been in a long, long while, and Colin experienced an absence of anxiety so unusual he decided it must be bliss. He told her of the long, strange and painful night he had spent, and she listened with a care and concern that belied the criticisms of Rowland McGuire. 'I'm proud of you. You slew the dragon,' she said, when Colin recounted his battle with that tape-recording machine, and Colin, who had not thought of it like that, felt comforted and hoped this was true.

'So I didn't sleep at all last night,' he explained, some while later. 'I had no sleep and then I walked about a thousand blocks in the rain. All I could think about was seeing you. I had to see you, and now I see why.'

He bent across and kissed her hair, then her mouth, which opened with an already sweet familiarity under his.

'Considering you hadn't slept and I'd been so miserable,' Lindsay said, 'it's astonishing the progress we've made, don't you think?'

'I do. One millimetre, that time?'

'Less. Half a millimetre at most. Very close indeed.'

'I thought so. We're beginning to know each other. I think, next time . . .'

'Mmm. So do I.' She stretched. 'What shall we do now? It's afternoon. Colin, you must be longing to sleep properly . . .'

'I'm not. I feel astonishingly awake. We could order up some food from room service. Some champagne.'

'Oh, let's. And have it in bed?'

'Of course.'

'We could watch some stupid movie on television . . .'

'We could. I love watching television in the day; it always feels debauched. So we could watch a movie, or talk, or I could just lie here and look at your eyes . . .'

'You could tell me all about this lovely house you've found . . .'

'I'll do better than that. I'll take you there, after Thanksgiving. We could go back to England on the same flight. I'll have a little gap before filming starts. I could drive you down there. We could stay at an inn and sit by a fire, and I could make love to you all night . . .'

Lindsay sat up. 'Colin, did you know this was going to happen?'

'No, not today. I hoped – well, in due course. You know.'

'I didn't see it coming at all. Not until just before you kissed me.' She gave a small frown. 'At least, I don't think I did.' She hesitated. 'Colin, what I said to you before . . .'

'Not the best timing.'

'I know, I talk too much, and always at the wrong moment. I was nervous . . .'

She paused. 'Colin, it can be a very bad idea to go to bed with someone you like. I learned that years ago. A friend becomes a lover; you lose the lover; you lose the friend. I wouldn't want that to happen to us.'

'It won't happen to us.'

'Can we promise each other that? We agree now: no

regrets ever, or complications? Just something that happened to make us both very, very happy at the time?’

She held out her hand to him. Colin bent over her palm, so she could not see his expression and kissed it.

‘Sure,’ he said. ‘It’s a deal.’

Colin finally left the Pierre at around ten-thirty that night. The third experiment had fulfilled their predictions, and as they both agreed, the fourth was a conclusive triumph. Colin walked along anonymous hotel corridors, missed the elevators, circled the Pierre several times, and eventually found himself in the lobby. He walked through it, cloaked in joy. He bumped into a tall thin young woman with very short blond hair, unseasonably dressed in a crop-top, pedal pushers and ballerina slippers. Some while after she had greeted him, he realized that this was Lindsay’s assistant, Pixie, who when last seen two days previously had had shoulder-length black hair.

He examined her, smiling. ‘Got it,’ he said finally. ‘Jean Seberg, in *Breathless*?’

‘Spot on.’ Pixie looked at him closely and raised one eyebrow. ‘You look happy,’ she said.

‘Pixie, I am happy. I am extraordinarily happy. Isn’t it the most wonderful world?’

Pixie looked at his dishevelled hair, dishevelled clothes and radiant expression. Aware that she had become invisible to him, she raised the other eyebrow, smiled, and kindly showed him to the exit door. Colin left the hotel and soon afterwards discovered he was back at the Conrad, though he had no recollection of any period of transit between the two. Emily, seeing at once that he was in no condition to understand the English language, kept her news to the minimum, despite the fact that she had been longing to impart it for most of the day.

'She's *in*,' she said. 'Natasha Lawrence is *in*. She has been admitted to the Conrad, God help us all. I voted against, and those four darned male simpletons voted for. This we will discuss further tomorrow, Colin. Meanwhile, Thalia with an unpronounceable surname called. You are to fly out tomorrow afternoon to Montana, and continue your work with that peculiar director man there. Perhaps more importantly, and certainly more urgently, your friend Rowland McGuire has called.' She paused. 'He first called at ten-thirty this morning, and spoke to Frobisher in a somewhat heated way. He has called on the hour, every hour since, and if I am not mistaken, that will be him calling now. So take this call in your room, Colin, which you will find at the end of the corridor. And collect your wits, because I've already spoken to him, and he does not sound in the most tractable of moods.'

Colin did as he was bade. He found his own room. He found the telephone.

'Hello, Rowland,' he said. 'What a wonderful world.'

'Perhaps you'd be good enough to explain just what the fuck you think you're doing?' Rowland said, in tones of great politeness. 'I'm now at home. It's four o'clock in the morning. In front of me is a postcard from you which I received four days ago. It reads as follows: 'New York glorious. Lindsay adorable. O brave new world. Love, Colin.' The style didn't surprise me. I wasn't altogether surprised by the content, but now I'm confused. If Lindsay is so adorable, would you like to explain why you've been lying to her? You can thank me for not giving you away this morning, while you're about it. Shute Farm? Owned by someone your father knows? Available at a miraculously low rent?'

'All true,' said Colin, gazing out of the windows at the moon.

'Are you drunk?'

'Not on alcohol, no.'

'All true? Then your interpretation of truth must be very different from mine. Maybe you'd like to explain why you failed to tell Lindsay the *exact* truth: to wit – that house is owned by your father and entailed to you, as it will be entailed to your sons, or – failing that – your cousin's sons. To all intents and purposes, Colin, you own it – along with Shute itself, God alone knows how many other tenant farms, cottages and houses, plus an obscene amount of Oxfordshire. I find it surprising that you neglected to mention these belongings of yours. Were you similarly reticent about the forty thousand acres in Scotland, and the umpteen million you inherited from the Lancaster clan? Colin, it was perfectly obvious that Lindsay knows none of this, and you, for some reason I cannot comprehend, are deceiving her and manoeuvring her into becoming your tenant at a knock-down rent. You're doing this, what's more, at a time in her life when she's especially vulnerable to assistance of that kind. Now I know your schemes, Colin, and I've seen them blow up in everyone's faces a thousand times. So I'm warning you, if you end up harming Lindsay, or hurting her in any way . . .'

'I love her,' Colin said, in a beatific voice, still staring at the moon. 'I love her. I adore her. She's the most wonderful woman ever born.'

This checked Rowland for rather less long than Colin had hoped.

'Then this is worse than I thought,' he said, in a brusque way. 'You do *not* love her, Colin. You fall in love the way other people catch colds.'

'No, I don't,' said Colin, in a robust way. 'I *used* to, I admit that, but I haven't done that for at least eight years. I love her. I love her with all my heart. I worship the very ground on which she walks.'

'Colin, you've known her less than two weeks.'

'That has nothing to do with it,' Colin replied, his wits returning, and a note of unmistakable conviction

entering his voice. 'You can love someone just like *that*. He snapped his fingers. 'You meet them, you know you're going to love them, and the love starts to grow. And if you don't know that, Rowland, you're a great deal stupider than I thought.'

Rowland hesitated. 'Very well,' he said. 'I concede that can happen. It doesn't last.'

'This is going to last. I've just left her now. I've been with her all day – and I'm so happy I can hardly speak. She's loyal and good and candid and funny and warm . . .'

'Colin, I wouldn't argue with any of that. I know her too well; she's also scatty, impetuous and naïve. She has a terrible temper, a nasty tongue and a marked inability to *think*. She is, without a doubt, one of the most impossible goddamned irritating women I've ever known . . .'

'You see? You're fond of her too!' Colin proclaimed on a note of triumph. 'I can hear it in your voice. She's a *paragon*. And you know the best thing of all Rowland? She likes *me*. She can see my faults and she *still* likes me. She doesn't know about the money of Shute – she likes me for *myself*. For the first time in my life I have no doubts about that – in fact, if she knew about the money, I'm afraid she might like me less. So I want her to know me, *really* know me, before she finds out. I want her to see Shute for the first time, and not know it's mine, so she can just love it for itself, and then I want her to marry me. I'm going to marry her, Rowland, and if you come between her and me, I'll fucking well kill you, because she is the best thing that's ever happened to me. Apart from you, she's the one good thing, the one incontestably good thing that has happened to me since Edward died.'

There was a long silence then. In London, knowing Colin would never mention his brother unless he passionately meant what he said, Rowland bowed his

head in his hands. In New York, Colin thought of Lindsay in his arms and felt blessed.

'I'm going to marry her, Rowland, and I'm going to marry her within six months,' he continued, in a quieter voice. 'I'm going to ask her the very second I think she might accept, and I damn near asked her an hour ago – so you can draw your own conclusions from that.'

'In that case,' Rowland said, after a pained hesitation, 'I shall say nothing to Lindsay about Shute. I hope you know you can rely on that. But I also hope you know what you're doing, because Lindsay would be very easy indeed to hurt—'

'As you should know,' replied Colin, in a flash, 'considering how you hurt her today. You reduced her to tears—'

'I did what?'

'You made her cry, and you're not going to do it again. She was in an utterly miserable state – and I'm not surprised. You destroy every bit of confidence she has. She's trying to make a new start in life, and what do you do? You roll in like a fucking Centurion tank, and you tell her she's naïve and childish, and only a fool would have signed that book contract. Not everyone has your fucking unshakeable self-confidence, Rowland. Why don't you *think*?'

'I made her cry?' Rowland sounded both bewildered and shocked. 'That's the last thing on God's earth I'd have wanted to do. I thought – we argue, Lindsay and I. We're always having some fight. I lose my temper, she loses hers, and then the next day—'

'Well, don't lose your temper with her!' Colin cried. 'I love her. I won't have you talking to her like that. I saw you do it in Oxford, and I wanted to punch you then. Lindsay's right – anyone would think you were her father, the way you talk to her . . .'

Rowland, who had begun to speak, was brought up short.

'Her father. I see. Were there any details of my private conversation with Lindsay that weren't reported back?'

'No, since you ask. She told me the whole miserable story from beginning to end. She tried to hide it, when I first arrived, but I *knew* there was something wrong, and then she just broke down. She started crying and she couldn't stop. I put my arms around her, and—' He broke off. 'And, anyway, I calmed her down, eventually. I explained you didn't *really* despise her. I told her how you're always bawling me out. We agreed in the end that you were right rather too often, but you weren't such a bad sort and we both quite liked you. None of which means that you shouldn't be ashamed of yourself.'

'I'm certainly ashamed to have made her cry. Perhaps you'd be good enough to tell her that,' Rowland said curtly. 'Meanwhile, if there's anything worse than the thought of the two of you discussing my defects in that particular cosy, nauseating way, I don't know what it is, so—'

'Oh, we forgot about you after a bit,' Colin said, in a cheerful, consoling tone. 'We never mentioned you again, funnily enough . . .'

'I'm hanging up, Colin.'

'Wait, wait, wait. Rowland – just one question.'

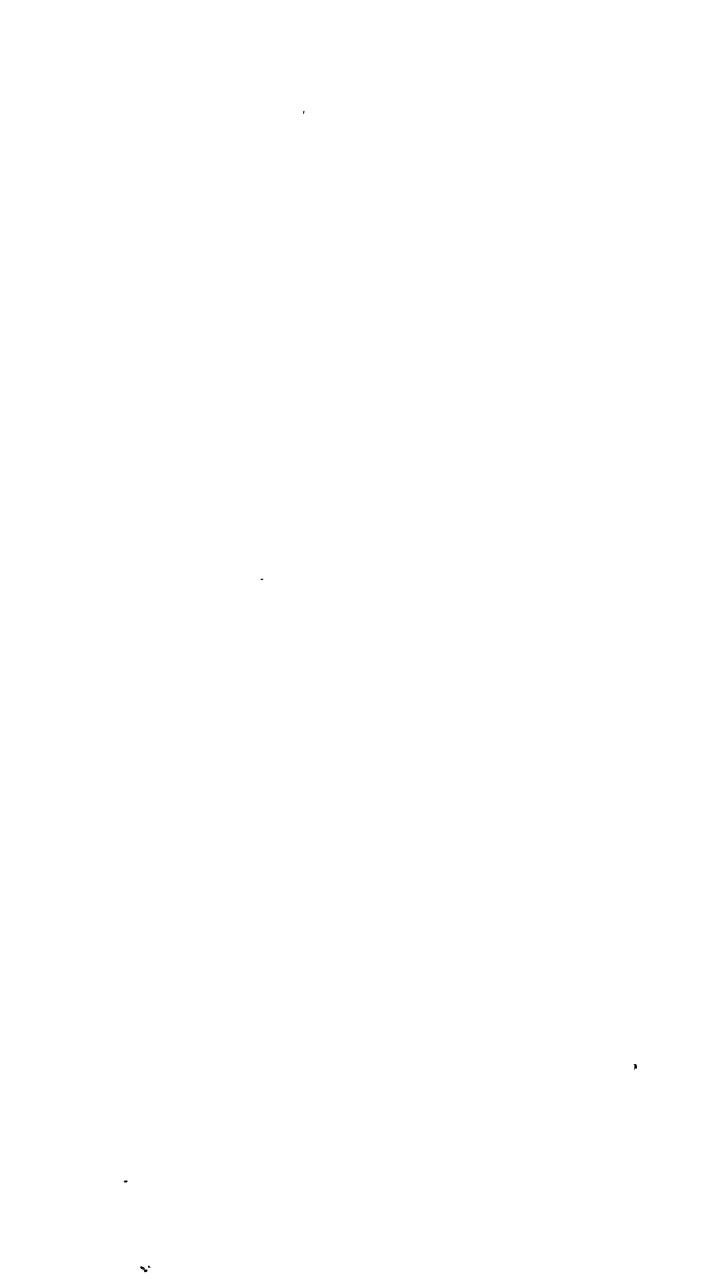
'What?'

'Will you be my best man, Rowland?'

Rowland considered this question for what seemed to Colin an unnecessarily long time.

'No,' he said eventually, his tone altering. 'No. I'm very fond of you, Colin, but I don't think I will. Good-night.'

TWO LETTERS AND
FOUR FAXES



XII

Throughout the following week, the telephone lines between Lindsay at the Pierre, and Colin, staying at Tomas Court's ranch in Montana, were kept very busy. It was a week of *correspondences*, and in more than one sense, Lindsay was later to decide. During it, fax lines, the international mail, and in one case a courier service, were kept busy as well.

The first missive, its formality of tone perhaps explained by the fact that it was the last of six drafts he had written, came in the form of a letter from Rowland McGuire.

your pardon – how stilted that sounds! Lindsay, I'm so sorry and so sad to have caused you pain.

The conversation with Colin has made me realize that I have to be very careful how I express myself. I am not finding it easy to write this, and I want to be sure I avoid ambiguities, so will you forgive me for any awkwardnesses here? Everything I say, however clumsily expressed, is written from the heart.

I don't want to make excuses for myself, but I do want you to know that almost everything I said to you yesterday stemmed from my anxiety on your behalf. Lindsay, I look on you as a close and dear friend, for whom I feel an unwavering concern. I want you to find happiness and, yes, fulfilment in everything you do. That is why I question and argue as I do. I now realize just how badly I put my arguments yesterday. You were right to resent the way I spoke, but I would like you to understand that I don't mean to interfere, or snipe from the sidelines. I just can't bear to think that, as a result of all these recent changes and uprootings, you might experience difficulties, hardship, or unhappiness of any kind.

Colin has made me see how inept I am at conveying that concern to you. I'm grateful to him for that. Talking to him was a chastening experience; he made me see – well, many things for which I feel the deepest regret.

He also made me see that I've made one great error, an error I want to correct. I see I've always been quick to criticize, and that I have never told you how much I like, respect, value and admire you. So I say it now – without reservations. I hope you will believe that.

We have worked so closely together, and seen one another so often, that I realize I have assumed, in my usual arrogant way, that you knew this. I've assumed you would understand the unspoken, and I see now just how mistaken that was. Colin said you felt I

despised you – Lindsay, nothing could be further from the truth. I feel for you the very warmest admiration and regard; I rely on your friendship to a far greater degree than you perhaps realize; but then, I trust you completely – and I'm not good at trusting; I trust very few people indeed. I feel the deepest affection for you, Lindsay, even when I am insulting you, even when I have lost my temper, and especially when you are being, as you often are, one of the most provoking, most impossible women I've ever known.

You have great generosity of heart, Lindsay, and despite what I said yesterday, when I was angry for a hundred other reasons that need not worry you, I realize that your intuition and instincts are much sharper than mine. Yes, you jump to conclusions, but they are often the correct ones, whereas I am often too slow to acknowledge a truth, and try to argue it away. Something very obvious can be staring me in the face, and yet I refuse to see it until it is too late and an opportunity has gone. I don't know why I do that: obstinacy, perhaps, or I could blame caution. I think I sometimes fail to act for fear of mistaking the circumstances, or for fear of causing harm.

Well, I won't dwell on these very male defects, and I know I can rely on you to mock them. The point is, I accused you yesterday of acting first and thinking afterwards. I now see that's not always a vice, and can be a virtue. It is a virtue you possess – to act on the impulses of the heart – and I wish it were more often my own.

There are many other things I would have liked to say to you, but now is not the moment; besides, this letter is already too long. So, will you forgive what I said yesterday? There will be no more lectures; I give you my word.

I wish you happiness, joy and success with your book, with your new life, and perhaps with your new

home. In respect of property, Colin is a very good guide and advisor – far better than I could ever be. You can be confident that any proposals he makes are made with your best interests at heart. Colin can be as exasperating as you can be – and as I know you can be – but he is a good and utterly trustworthy man.

If you do go to live at Shute Farm, I hope it will fulfil all the dreams you spoke of – I'm sure it will. Meanwhile, I'm not certain when you are returning to London – perhaps after Thanksgiving? Perhaps when you return we could all three of us meet. I would like to see you and try to begin making amends.

I can't stop thinking about your tears. I wish to God this had never happened. I realize that now I've said only a few of the things I wanted to say, and now I've said them ill. Lindsay, I trust to your generous heart to read between the lines and see the degree

This letter, which Lindsay received without curses and with tears, arrived at the Pierre on Sunday afternoon. On the tenth reading, she still found herself puzzled by that reference of Rowland's to his punctuation. Rowland's punctuation was meticulous down to the last semicolon; in which respect, she thought, it was in singular contrast to her own letter to him, which had crossed with this one, and which she had posted express the previous day.

Dear Rowland,

I am in one of my *states*. I can't sleep, and I've been pacing up and down the room in the stupidest way. It's the middle of the night, and I can still hear myself shouting down the phone at you like some demented fishwife. Oh dear!

Listen – I'm just going to scribble this very fast and then rush out and catch the first post. Rowland, I'm so sorry I said all those horrible things to you. I want you to know – everything you accused me of was true. I see now that I've been a total fool about that bloody book contract. I think I knew that publisher man was a complete shit really, but I sort of buried the idea and hoped I was wrong. You're right about the money too – what's the matter with me? I always *intend* to get tough on the money front and then I never do. I think it's that I secretly despise money, so talking about it, let alone angling for more, always seems so *low*. So I'm always v. dignified, get screwed and end up living on vegetables for the next ten years.

But you don't have to worry, *truly*. I have some money saved, and I think Shute Farm may work out – in which case, I shall be able to afford bread and jam, if not blinis and caviar. I'll be so tucked away too, that I'll have no distractions – no movie theatres or friends, so I expect I'll write the

I've decided to stay on here until then; I have some Chanel research to do – I'm looking forward to becoming an archive addict. Quiet, dedicated and *nun-like* – and Colin is going to be here, so it seemed quite a good idea.

Colin came here yesterday, after you telephoned; he was understanding, gentle and kind. You have nice friends, Rowland. He told me all about his brother and how you helped him at Oxford. He is very loyal and devoted to you, and so am I.

He's going to take me to see Shute Farm when we get back to England. I'm praying it will work out. I'm praying I'll cope if it does – I've never lived in the country. If you've forgiven me, I hope you'll come and see me there – you could teach me *some* useful rustic things: how to chop logs, how to light a fire.

Christmas sweater in a very sober way. When you next see me, you'll find I'm a reformed character.

Lindsay.

Something went wrong with the US Mail Express system, or possibly there were problems at the UK end. Lindsay's letter did not arrive in London until four days had passed; then, since Lindsay did indeed have horrible and illegible, handwriting, especially when writing numbers, so that all her sevens looked like ones, the letter was delivered to Rowland's neighbour at number eleven in his terrace, and not to his house at number seventeen. The neighbour was away; he finally dropped the letter through Rowland's door late at night on the Tuesday before Thanksgiving.

Rowland found it on the mat early the following morning, as he was leaving for work. He read it only once on that occasion, but he read it with great care. He returned inside, called his secretary and various colleagues, cancelled all his appointments for the next three days, gave his deputy editor instructions, and then left for Oxford before nine.

Meanwhile, Colin Lascelles was finding the telephone an inadequate instrument to express himself.

Saturday. Montana.

Dearest Lindsay,

Have just spoken to you. Am going to bed. The sky here is amazing - I've never seen so many incredibly brilliant stars. I miss you terribly. I think I said that on the phone, but I'll say it again. I could throttle Tomas for dragging me out here, but I do feel sorry for him; he looks desperately ill. I'm going to fax this to the Pierre, so I can't say what I want to say. Imagine asterisks and all they imply. Can you understand Latin? I need to know immediately. You can fax me

at the above number and I wish you would because I feel totally sick at heart and soul. I send you love and *trois mille bises*.

Colin.

Tuesday. Montana.

Darling Lindsay,

Talking to you on the telephone is the only thing that's keeping me sane. When we talk, I feel as if I'm with you, holding you in my arms (and if you're the desk clerk at the Pierre reading this fax, FUCK OFF. This is private, you understand?) I've never known it to be so easy to talk to someone as it is to you. Do you feel that, darling? You've made such a difference to me in such a short time. I feel I can do *anything*: climb a mountain; fly.

I got up very early this morning – I couldn't sleep anyway for missing you. I borrowed one of Tomas's horses and went for a ride. The landscape is spectacular. I could see the peaks of Glacier National Park in the distance. Watched the sun rise and thought of you.

Tomas now much better and visibly stronger. There's umpteen production people here during the day, but they piss off in the evenings to some hotel, thank God, so apart from the odd bodyguard and staff, it's then just Tomas and Thalia and me.

He and I had a long talk yesterday, after Thalia had gone to bed. I forgot to tell you about this. He's a very interesting man – proud. I feel for him. I think he's in agony about – better use initials – NL. And about her move to Emily's building. I heard from Emily this evening, and apparently, NL must have had everything organized, and ready to roll, because the decorators are in there already. According to the Emily bush telegraph, always reliable, the whole

Christmas sweater in a very sober way. When you next see me, you'll find I'm a reformed character.

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thing will be finished by the end of this week. Yet she *can't* have known they'd admit her and the odds were against – most mysterious! NL apparently very thick with Biff already, which was predictable. H. Foxe singing her praises as well, which annoys Emily no end. NL *not* popular with Giancarlo and the other porters though, I hear. Trouble of various kinds, I gather – constant hassle from some anonymous caller – in view of what I told you, worrying, eh?

Listen, darling, we must talk tomorrow about Thanksgiving and all our other plans. I always mean to on the phone, but my mind goes into a whirl the second I hear your voice, and besides, we have other things to talk about then.

Is your friend Genevieve still coming up from Washington with her husband for Thanksgiving? When shall we fly back to England? I can't wait to show you Shute Farm. Isn't it great about the rent? I gather they want a tenant who *loves* the place – money isn't the issue. Money should never be the issue, I say, don't you agree?

Darling Lindsay, I'm very glad you can't read Latin. I'm afraid I had it rather dinned into me at school. Vivamus, dear Lindsay, atque amemus – soles occidere et redire possunt, nobis, cum semel occidit brevis lux, nox est perpetua una dormienda . . . Incidentally, you know that little thing you do that I mentioned (desk clerk at the Pierre, get LOST) the thing you do when I – you remember? Well, I'm thinking about it now. Effect immediate – and wasted alas; most frustrating. I send love, darling Lindsay. Take care of yourself. I hope the research goes well. Gabrielle Chanel sounds odd. Why didn't she marry the Duke of Westminster? I think of you in the archive place, darling. If I were with you there, we could do some very interesting research . . . Will call usual time

tomorrow. You can read my writing, I hope? Darling,
I kiss all your asterisks.

Colin.

Wednesday. The Pierre.

Dearest Colin,

The desk clerks here are giving me very peculiar looks. I wonder why? It's a great boost to my confidence – I'm perfecting a sultry slink for their benefit. This cheers me up when I get back from work. All day today in the Abbott Levy archive at MOMA. Wearying. Escaped finally, and came back feeling a bit low for some reason – having to concentrate, I expect. Then Emily kindly called and asked me round for a drink. We had great fun – I think I'm now getting used to her. I certainly like her a lot. I heard all the latest news about Biff, H. Foxe et al. (Ah, I find I do know some Latin after all.) I'll regale you with it when you call.

Emily told me the whole story of Anne Conrad and the two brothers. Heavens! It terrified me. No wonder she still haunts the place. The elevator was out of order when I left (overloaded by NL's decorators, and the first time it's broken down since 1948, Emily said), so I had to walk down that staircase *alone*.

I wished you'd been here when I returned. I miss you too, but there are so many things we need to talk about. Hurry up and come back to New York, I'm lonely and V jvfuf lbh jrer xvffvat zl oernfgf evtug abj. You are a wonderful ybire, and I am very, very sbaq of you – but don't make me run too soon, dear Colin: I'm always slow off the starting blocks.

I'm faxing this, so you can work out the above. Also this: V jvfuf lbh jrer vafvqr zr, in fact, V jvfuf guvf constantly. More research tomorrow. Not sure I'm cut out for this – archive libraries awfully *quiet* – no-one

allowed to *speak*. Good night, Colin. I can just see the moon. Can you see it too? I send all best wishes and love, kisses too.

Lindsay.

Friday. Montana.

My darling Lindsay,

Your letter came today. Darling, it made me so happy. I've read it a thousand times. It's folded up with that wicked fax you sent me – naughty girl! I carry both of them next to my heart. Your code nearly drove me frantic – but, yes, I've cracked it. Wish-fulfilment and memories of prep-school helped me. Very useful! I've been thinking about lbhe oernfgf all day, and how it feels when I pbzr vafvqr you. Do you know what it does to me when you gbhpu zl pbpx? I was thinking about it today, in the middle of a production meeting – concentration badly impaired. Also had the most rabezbfh rerpgvba. Most embarrassing.

Darling, promise me: I don't want you to worry about *anything*. We can go as slow or as fast as you want – at the moment, I can't think beyond the day when I next see you. I just want to take you in my arms. I will never rush you, darling, please believe me. If I should ever sound hasty, it's because I'm so impatient to be with you. Darling, you are in my thoughts, day and night. Everything I see and do and think is only for you. I watch the sun rise and the moon shine and, unless I can tell you about them, they have no meaning at all. Oh, Lindsay, I wish you were *here*. Darling, your absence makes my heart *ache*.

I've been trying to convince myself that this sudden parting could be of use – a baptism of fire, perhaps. When we return to England, I'll have to be in Yorkshire most of the time, and I'm praying that this

separation now will help us to bear that one. What do you think? We'll still be able to talk to each other, the way we do now. I'll have a mobile. You can always leave messages – coded or otherwise! – on my machines. Then, if you're at Shute – and I hope you will be, darling – I'll be able to come down to see you on odd days and the occasional weekends. It's about four hours door to door – I've been working out times and best routes! And you might like to come up to Yorkshire, perhaps, to see at first hand the sheer soul-destroying tedium of actual filming, in what will probably be snow or pouring rain, I expect.

Then you could have the dubious pleasure of meeting the famous Nic Prick – you remember? The one who played Prospero to my definitive Caliban at school? He was called Hicks-Henderson then, and he was a world-class jerk aged fourteen. He remains one. He flew in here yesterday from LA – or the Coast, as he likes to call it. I was counting his name-dropping rate: it was three a minute when he arrived; he got it up to six a minute by the time he left for New York. I realized that Tomas is very devious and very smart: the Gilbert Markham character Nic's playing is a smug, vain, sanctimonious, prurient prat – type-casting. After he'd called me 'Col' fifteen times, I remarked on this. Sarcasm wasted: he was delighted – but then *he* thinks Markham is the hero. I think Tomas was very amused at that. Have you started reading *Tenant*, darling? I want to know if you agree with Rowland – maybe there were things I missed.

Must concentrate. Darling – two things. First, you remember what I told you yesterday about events in Glacier Park? Well, the police arrived in force not long after we spoke, and apparently that identification is now confirmed: an Australian tourist – gay, I think.

He'd only arrived in the States a few weeks before and had been hitching. No family over here, his family back home not close and not sure of his travel plans, didn't know he was heading for Montana etc., etc. That's why it's all dragged on so long. When he hadn't written or called for four months, some cousins finally raised the alarm. They did the ID from dental chart records, I think. Poor, poor man.

This means, of course, that JK is alive – but I always *knew* he was, you remember? Apart from those events at the loft, I could *sense* him there. I can sense his presence here too – the result, well, you can imagine: phones never stop ringing, everyone edgy, security people crawling all over the place, and Tomas utterly silent on the entire issue, though you can see he's in the most terrible state, terrified for his son. He was on the phone to NL for three *hours* today and came back grim-faced – worked us all until nearly midnight, which is when I began writing this.

I can't wait to get out of this place and come back to you. Which brings me to my second point. Darling, about Thanksgiving. I'm so glad! It will give Emily a great deal of pleasure, and it's only dinner, after all. She'll be inviting some other people, I expect – she always makes rather a big thing of Thanksgiving. Don't know who. Don't care. I shall only have eyes for you.

Darling, I've been thinking, I'm so desperate to see you. Tomas leaves early Wednesday morning to join NL for Thanksgiving – I'm going to fly back with him in one of the studio's jets; it's the quickest way I can get back to New York. I'll be there by midday on Wednesday, so here's a suggestion: Darling, why don't I book us a marvellous room at the Plaza for Wednesday and Thursday night? That would mean you'd save on the expense of a room at the Pierre –

economy, darling. think of that! And we could meet at the Plaza, like wicked, illicit lovers, wouldn't that be fun? You could show me your sultry slink, then we could go up to our room and stay there shamelessly for a day and a half – until we have to leave Thursday evening for Emily's Thanksgiving beanfeast. Would you like that?

I know you want to see Gini and her husband, and Markov and Jippy – as they're all tied up for dinner, why don't you get them to meet us in the Oak Room at the Plaza for Thanksgiving drinks? Sevenish? Then you and I could go on to Emily's – I'm bribing her to let me sit next to you. I intend to do unspeakable things to you, hidden by the tablecloth – I want to see if you can keep a straight face . . .

I'd love to meet your friends – especially Markov. Did you realize that I spent our first-meeting lunch in Oxford worrying about him? From the moment Tom and Rowland first mentioned his name, I was in a state of jealous torment: I thought he might be your lover – that's why I started drinking like a fish. Total panic. Very glad *indeed* that he's gay.

Oh Lindsay, Lindsay, what have you done to me? I'm usually a man of great equilibrium, as you know. Always calm, always confident, and yet now – Are you smiling, darling? You have the most beautiful smile in the world; it lights up a room. Of course, you also have the most beautiful, the most desirable oernsgf in the world. I kiss them. Oh God, I wish I were vafvqr lbh now, darling.

I'm sending this by fax – shouldn't really, but the post is so *slow*. Darling, I'll be with you Wednesday. Let me know *re* above Plaza plot etc. when we speak. I'm sorry this letter is so long, but it's been a vile day, and I was feeling miserable without you. I've just read your letter again – Oh, Lindsay. Trust me, darling. It made me so happy, what you said about the *simplicity*

of our shpxvat – I feel that too. I kiss all your beloved
asterisk bits. I send you my love. Only 101 hours
until I next see you. Stars very bright tonight. Almost
a full moon. Yours, darling,
Colin.

THANKSGIVING

.

XIII

In Oxford that Wednesday, the day before Thanksgiving, Katya was enduring the last fifteen minutes of a tutorial. It was being conducted by her senior tutor, Dr Miriam Stark, a woman whose cool intelligence Katya feared; it concerned the use of narrators in two novels by the Brontës. It had begun with Katya reading aloud to Dr Stark the essay she had written on this subject, comparing Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* with her sister Anne's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*; it had continued with Dr Stark's analysis of that essay; the questions had been unrelenting and the criticisms barbed.

Katya, who had begun writing having done too little preparation, and who had continued writing with her mind on quite a different subject, was aware this essay was a poor effort. For several weeks now, Katya had been suffering a certain mental and emotional turmoil; reading her essay aloud, she had realized that turmoil and confusion were evident in every line. In an obstinate way, she continued reading, praying Dr Stark might not notice the skimpiness of her arguments, praying she might be impressed by the two obscure critical references Katya had tacked on at the last moment, and – failing that – might be distracted by Katya's aggressive and iconoclastic tone.

Dr Stark had not been distracted by such frills; she was concentrating on fabric, on basic tailoring, and for the past twenty minutes had been scissoring Katya's offering apart.

Katya glared at Dr Stark, an American who had graduated *summa cum laude* from Barnard, but whose MA and PhD had been awarded by Oxford. She was in her late thirties, was beautiful, highly distinguished, and *thin*, which seemed unfair.

Dr Stark, famously unmarried, had a cloistered air about her; she possessed an aura, Katya always felt, of steely, determined, female dedication. She was a Fellow of Oxford's last remaining women's college, a college to which Katya had applied in a burst of feminism she now regretted, and she was the kind of woman who could spend half an hour dissecting the implications of one word.

'Katya, I can see your mind was not on this essay when you wrote it, and is not on it now . . . ' Dr Stark paused, having caught Katya staring moodily through the window at the quadrangle and pouring rain outside.

'Yes, well possibly,' Katya mumbled, taking refuge in mutiny. 'I don't really like either novel.' She eyed Dr Stark. 'All that hysterical spinsterish passion. I don't really go for the Brontës at all.'

'Evidently,' Dr Stark replied, showing no inclination to argue with that kind of coat-trailing idiocy. 'Katya, have you asked yourself why it is you have these . . . problems with women writers? *All* women writers?'

'I don't,' said Katya, who on principle never admitted to having a problem with anything.

'Katya – it is most marked. It was apparent in your work on Eliot, even on Austen. It is most apparent here. I set you this particular essay, Katya, because I hoped it might suggest to you that these novels, far from consisting of womanish outpourings, as you seem to believe, are schematic, and very carefully planned.'

She frowned. 'I find it strange, Katya, that in addressing yourself – intermittently, as I think you will admit – to the question of narrative techniques, you have

with foolish prejudice.' She paused. 'Such skills, I sometimes fear, are endangered – might even be on the way to becoming extinct. Except, of course, in places such as this . . .'

She glanced towards the quadrangle; Katya glanced at her watch.

'Such skills,' Dr Stark continued, 'useful in the study of literature, can occasionally be of use in life.' She paused. 'Katya, something is wrong. You have ability, and on the evidence of this essay, you are squandering it. You are, when you wish to be, intelligent. You were most certainly not in an intelligent frame of mind when writing this, nor are you in a receptive frame of mind now. Katya, you are clearly distracted by some other matter – would you like to tell me what that is?'

'No,' said Katya.

'Deal with it,' Dr Stark replied, gathering up her skirts and rising to her feet. 'You are at liberty to waste your own time, but not mine. Six thousand words on the complexities and significance of the heavily disguised time scheme in *Wuthering Heights* by next Tuesday. Should you feel disposed to rewrite this particular essay, it would be of benefit.'

Sod it, thought Katya, rising hastily, as Dr Stark whisked past her and moved to her desk. She thought of her own novel, begun on a sudden impulse earlier that week, at three o'clock in the morning, when Tom was fast asleep. It was told, in the first person, by a woman twenty years older than Katya: she had been pleased by its world-weary tone, its *éclat* and its bite. It now occurred to her, as Dr Stark began to gather up armfuls of papers and books, that perhaps first-person female narration was a mistake. Why not have two narrators? Four? Omniscient third person? No, far too dated. A subtle *combination* of first and third? Stream of consciousness? Diaries? Some metafictional folderols, perhaps? It came to Katya that her narrator, who was

of course not a heroine, but merely a *voice*, would function far more effectively with testicles. She was perfecting this sex change in her head, and wondering whether it might toughen up that interesting section on page four, when she realized that Dr Stark, saying something about picking up lamb chops from Sainsbury's, was accompanying her out of the door.

They crossed the quad together and turned out into the street. There, Katya, striding along in a bad temper, combat cap pulled low on her brow, head lowered against the rain, collided with someone in a black suit and a black overcoat.

'Good heavens,' said Dr Stark, coming to an abrupt halt. 'Rowland? It is Rowland, isn't it? I can't believe it. It must be fifteen years.'

It was indeed, and undeniably, Rowland McGuire. His hair was very wet; his coat was soaked; his expression was grim, dazed and dark. Katya, lip curling, thought he had a Rochester look.

'Miriam,' he said, as Dr Stark blushed a slow, deep crimson. 'I — this is a surprise. I've been looking for Katya—'

'And now you have found her. Fortunate.'

'This city is *impossible*. You can't *park* in it. You can't *drive* in it. Katya, I'm looking for Tom. I need to see Tom. Urgently . . . Yes, almost fifteen years, Miriam.' He paused, frowning. 'After the Commem. Ball. Yorkshire, I think.'

'How accurate you are, Rowland. But then you always were.' Dr Stark smiled in a somewhat dangerous way. 'I agree about the traffic in this city. One always ends up going around in circles, don't you find? And now I must leave you. I'm late for a lecture, as it is . . .'

She disappeared. Katya had decided twenty seconds before that she did believe in destiny after all; she glared hard at the walls of her college.

'She's not going to a lecture. She's going to

Sainsbury's to buy lamb chops,' she said, in an angry voice. 'Why did she blush? She never blushes.'

'I haven't the least idea,' replied Rowland, in a tone that precluded further questions. He began walking away in the direction Dr Stark had taken, then halted abruptly and turned back.

'Tom,' he said, in what Katya felt was an odd, wild and highly agitated manner. 'I have to see Tom.'

'Well, you can't. Not today.' Katya was dressed in jeans and a workman's donkey jacket; she turned up its collar against the rain and scowled. 'Tom's in Scotland - Edinburgh. He flew up this morning for some stupid debating thing.'

'Scotland? Today? Christ.'

Katya gave him a venomous look. 'And he doesn't get back until tomorrow night,' she continued, setting off up the street. 'So you're out of luck. You should have phoned.'

'Phoned? I've been phoning since nine o'clock this morning. I've phoned his house; I've phoned his college, your college . . . I damn near drove off the motorway calling on the mobile . . . Scotland? It's term time, for God's sake.'

'Even so,' Katya said, walking faster, 'he doesn't have lectures. He rejigged his tutorials. Things have *changed*, Rowland, since your day. This place isn't the prison it used to be. *Shit*.' She came to a sudden halt. 'That bloody woman.'

'What woman?'

'Dr Stark. She just took an essay of mine apart.'

'That's her job.' Rowland had caught up with her; he frowned along the street. 'I didn't realize she was your tutor. It wasn't a good essay then?'

'No, it was a fucking awful one.' Katya glowered. 'My mind wasn't on it. My mind was on *other things*.'

She looked at Rowland closely as she made this remark; he seemed to pay it little attention.

'The Brontës,' Katya said, in furious tones. '*Wuthering Heights. The Tenant of Wildfell Hall. Passion.* Much that bloody Stark woman knows on that subject. Love – yawn bloody yawn.'

'She must know something on the subject. Miriam Stark wrote an excellent book on the Brontës.' Rowland continued to frown along the street. 'She was researching it when I knew her. I went to the Brontë parsonage in Haworth with her once . . .' He broke off and turned back to Katya. 'Never mind that now. Is there somewhere I can reach Tom? Do you have a number for him? Damn, no. That's no good. I need to see him . . .' Rowland looked up and down the street in a distracted way, as if expecting Tom to materialize at any second.

Katya gave him a withering look and strode off again.

'I can give him a message if you like,' she said, over her shoulder, 'or you can leave him a note. I'm going over to his room now. It's up to you.'

'A note. Yes, a note. That's an excellent idea . . .' Rowland accelerated his pace, overtook her, and set off up the street, Katya finding it difficult to keep up with him.

'Is that your car?' she said, in an accusing tone, as they finally reached Tom's house, having walked a considerable distance, in heavy rain, without a single word being spoken. Katya glared at the car in question, which was drawn up outside the front gate and parked in an impetuous way, one wheel on the pavement.

'Yes. Yes, it is—'

'Interesting,' said Katya, kicking the wheel. 'I always wondered what you drove . . .' She followed Rowland through the gate and caught up with him at the front door.

'And strange as it may seem,' she continued, in a poisonous tone, 'it's no good pushing and shoving at the door like that. You need a key. Luckily, I have one.'

'Here,' she said, as they entered Tom's room, a room which seemed to have a peculiar effect on Rowland McGuire. He was staring at the cerise sofa, then at the bookshelves; Katya held out a notebook and a pen to him. The pen was a biro, an unremarkable biro; looking at it, Rowland appeared transfixed.

'Christ,' he said again, directing his remark to the bookshelves. He looked at the notebook. 'What shall I say?'

'That's rather up to you, Rowland,' said Katya, in an acid voice. She gave him a measuring look and slowly unbuttoned and removed the donkey jacket. She pulled off her combat cap and shook loose her long, damp, russet hair.

'Tom - I need to talk to you,' Rowland wrote. He paused, frowning, then added, 'as soon as possible.' He frowned again, then added, 'I'll call you next week.'

'What's the date?' He looked up at Katya. 'The date - what date is it today?'

'It's the twenty-fifth. Wednesday, the twenty-fifth.' Katya gave him an unpitied stare. 'You'll find there's a date window on your watch, actually. I can see it from here.'

'Oh, yes, of course. Thanksgiving tomorrow. *Hell*,' said Rowland. He added the date to the note, frowned again and added, 'Kind regards, Rowland' and made for the door.

Katya panicked. 'I can make you a cup of coffee if you like,' she said, in an ungracious tone.

'No time,' Rowland replied. 'Thank you, but no time - I have to get back to London. I have a plane to catch . . .'

Katya listened to his footsteps descending the staircase. It was at this window, just a few weeks before, that she had watched him arrive in Colin Lascelles's astonishing Aston Martin. It was then, she thought, that she had first sensed the tremors; it was beside these very

bookshelves, as Rowland McGuire examined that Anne Brontë novel, that everything right in her life had begun to go wrong.

She strode up and down the room, clasping to her chest one of Tom's discarded sweaters. She found she was angry, confused and close to tears: Tossing the sweater down, she crossed to her work table and picked up the chapters of her novel, printed out early that morning, after Tom had left.

She had not wanted him to see what she had written, and now, rereading it, she saw why. She began to see the nakedness and duplicities of her own fictions. Snatching up the pages, she tore them into halves, then quarters, then eighths. Overwhelmed with guilt and misery, she threw this confetti on the floor. 'Fuck, fuck, fuck,' she said aloud, filled with rage against Rowland McGuire and herself, and furious at discovering that her novel was not about alienation, as she had supposed, but about love – a feeble topic, a woman's topic, after all.

She picked up one of the Brontë novels that had been the subject of her essay, and scowled at it. She flicked the pages, and then, her eye caught by a particular sentence, began reading. She carried the book across to the cerise sofa and curled up with it there.

What had she missed? What, exactly, had she missed? She began reading, mindful of Dr Stark's corrective scorn; to her surprise, the craving she now felt for Rowland McGuire diminished somewhat as she began to concentrate. Perhaps the exercising of her intellect would effect a cure, she thought, hoping that might be the case, for the craving was unlike any she had experienced before, and its nagging, obsessional vitality was something she had come to fear.

To her relief, this prose kept Rowland at bay for a while; despite the passion she had sneered at in her tutorial – or, possibly, because of it – she was still

reading two hours later, completely absorbed. Three hours later, stirred by what she had read, she felt a need to confess. Picking up pen and paper, she began writing to Tom.

'It's going to snow - there's a storm threatening,' Colin remarked as the limousine which had collected them at Kennedy turned out of the airport precincts. Beside him, Tomas Court, who had not spoken to him once on the flight from Montana, gave a sigh.

'It'll hold off. It's hours away yet,' he replied. He gave Colin a shrewd glance. 'What time are you meeting your friend?'

'Around one o'clock. One-thirty. At the Plaza.'

Colin craned his neck to look at the clouds bunched over the western horizon; they were edged with a jaundiced light. With difficulty, he prevented himself from consulting his watch which he had been checking at five-minute intervals throughout their flight.

'Relax.' Court gave a half smile. 'I won't make you late for your appointment. I guess you're pretty anxious to be on time . . .'

'Does it show that badly?' Colin asked.

'I recognize the symptoms,' Court replied, his manner kind enough, but faintly bored. 'What's her name?'

'Lindsay,' Colin said, his heart lifting as it always did when he pronounced, heard, thought of, or saw this name.

'We'll drop you at the Conrad,' Court continued. 'You find those pictures and notes, bring them down to TriBeCa . . . It won't take us long to go through them. Half an hour at most, then you'll be a free man.'

His tone, Colin felt, was slightly mocking. He considered arguing, then rejected the idea. The photographs concerned, in which Tomas Court had previously evinced little interest, showed the moorland landscape around their chosen Wildfell Hall. They were now lying

in their file in Colin's room at the Conrad; overnight, Tomas Court had decided that he had to re-examine them urgently. Colin, not pleased by this decision, which indeed threatened to delay him, was wary of protest. He now felt a growing respect, even affection, for Court, but he retained a keen sense of the man's perversity. If he demurred now, Court was more than capable of keeping him working throughout the afternoon.

Let him try, Colin thought; he had every intention, should that situation arise, of proving to Prospero that he had a will of his own. Meanwhile, it was simpler to humour his whim, produce the required pictures, which would almost certainly turn out to be irrelevant, agree with everything Court said, and then make his escape from TriBeCa to the joys that lay in wait for him uptown.

Court, meanwhile, had relapsed into a moody silence. Colin patted the breast pocket of his jacket, where Lindsay's letter and fax to him lay folded against his heart. Not for the first time that morning, he blessed the fact that he and the uncommunicative Court were travelling alone. Thalia Ng had left that morning to spend Thanksgiving with her widowed mother in Florida; Mario Schwartz had left to join his family in what he called Hicksville, Idaho; the rest of the production team had dispersed to various parts of America, leaving Colin to travel with the person least likely to interrupt his reveries. With relief, touching that precious letter, Colin began to rehearse its phrases in his mind.

There had been a 'but' in Lindsay's fax, a 'but' that drew Colin's eyes every time he reread it; there were fewer 'buts' in the letter, however, and this gave Colin heart.

He was almost certain that he could hear a new note in these sentences, as if Lindsay, writing to him from her hotel room, had begun to hear the same music that haunted him; Colin's mind dwelt on that music and its melodies. His hopes rose as they approached

Manhattan; this city contained Lindsay and very shortly she would be on her way to meet him at the Plaza. Find the photographs, he told himself, deliver them to Court's loft, make his escape. He dived out of the limousine in great haste as it pulled up in front of the Conrad, and entered that building blindly, praying that he would be eloquent, not tongue-tied, when he took Lindsay in his arms.

In the limousine, Tomas Court continued his journey south to TriBeCa; he watched the streets of Manhattan as they drove, and felt a familiar despondency settle upon him. He felt a brief, passing longing for the pure air, and the spaciousness, the great spaciousness, of Montana; then, remembering the interviews he had had with the police there, and the subsequent sleepless nights, he passed his hand across his face and closed his eyes.

On reaching TriBeCa he dismissed his driver, shouldering his bag himself, and stepped into the grim confines of the elevator. As its doors closed, he tensed; he had heard a sound, a small unidentifiable sound, perhaps the scrape of a shoe against concrete, and it had come from a landing above. The air in the elevator was faintly perfumed: the residue of a woman's scent clung to the air, and when he reached his floor and stepped out, he saw that a woman was there before him. She was in the act of tapping at his door; hearing the elevator, she started, then swung around.

She gave a low exclamation, then blushed, then took a step backwards; Court saw that she was carrying a small package – a package with his name on it written in large capitals – and that she was clutching this package to her breast, somewhat defensively. Court gave her a wary look, hesitated, then moved forward. He did not recognize her, but he recognized her type instantly: an out-of-work actress, he thought, with irritation – either that or, possibly, some fan.

unfastened; he could just see the cleft between her breasts. He noted that she had small, well-manicured, pretty hands.

'Two minutes,' he said and opened the door.

'You're an actress, aren't you?' he said, once the door was closed. He looked around the unnaturally tidy space of his loft: Thalia and Colin had made a thorough job of their cleansing operation, he saw. Without those piles of cardboard boxes, the room looked unfamiliar and faintly alien. He turned back to the woman with a sense of boredom, wondering how she would script her overtures, whether she would echo the words of her numerous predecessors, or whether she might surprise him by being original. He did not expect originality from women in this situation, nor was he going to receive it, he thought, as with an odd, defiant, half-obstinate glance in his direction, she set her package down delicately on his work table, and then began to unbutton her blouse.

'Sure, I've been an actress.' She gave another small frown. 'In a few crummy movies, blink and you miss me – that kind of thing. I've done a few TV shows. That's what's on the tape – kind of a composite: my best scenes, my best roles. The kind where I actually got to speak some dialogue . . .' She paused, an expression of faint mockery passing across her face. 'I've done other things besides acting, obviously. I mean, I've held down a whole lot of demanding positions. I've been a model, I worked in a gas station one time. Let's see . . . what else? Waited on tables, of course. But that was way back, when I was a student at UCLA . . .'

Court looked at her steadily; he could hear a certain anger in her voice, and for an instant saw it flash in her yellowish eyes. Liking the anger, he changed his mind.

'Look,' he said, less coldly, 'do your blouse up. You've been misinformed, I think. I don't audition this way.'

'Don't you? That's not what I heard. I asked around.

I take an interest in you – I have done for years.’ She hesitated, eyeing him, clasping her blouse across her breasts. ‘I really admire your movies – I wanted to tell you that. I’ve watched them a thousand times. I think you’re a really great director . . .’

Court turned away with a gesture of irritation. Her voice, with its faint hint of southern California, was beginning to grate on him. He liked neither her voice, nor her sentiments, and the momentary sympathy he had felt for her ebbed away.

‘Some people like my movies; some people loathe them, and either way, I’m indifferent,’ he said. ‘Also, I’m allergic to compliments – particularly fulsome ones. Do your blouse up. I’m expecting a colleague here any minute . . .’

Her response surprised him: he was used to obedience when he used that kind of tone. The girl seemed scarcely to have heard him and she ignored the contempt in his voice. She continued to look at him as he spoke, that small perplexed frown still creasing her brows. Then, with a sigh, and another yellowish glance in his direction, she began to move slowly around the room, her manner unhurried, as if she were here alone and waiting for someone to return.

She moved across to the tall windows, then back to the work table; in a desultory way, she removed her coat, then brushed her hand across a pile of scripts, picked up a book, examined it, then set it down. She moved with a grace that interested Court; her silence and her apparent absorption in her activities began to affect him. He wondered whether she had realized that he was likelier to respond to silence, and its ambiguities, far more than words.

As she moved around the room, he began to track her with his eyes as he might have done with a camera; he found the chemistry of the room was altering, thickening and becoming charged. She had his attention

now and he found he was interested in what she might do next: spoil the effect by speaking? Move towards the door and leave? She did move towards the door, and at this Court felt a sharp and immediate pulse of excitement; for the first time in almost three years he was remembering how much such encounters could fuel him, and how reliably, if briefly, they drove all thoughts of his wife from his mind.

He took a step towards the woman and regarded her levelly. He watched the light slide across the planes of her face; he watched a new concentration enter her eyes.

'When did you say your colleague was joining you?' she asked. 'Any minute now?'

Her eyes rested on his for a moment; then, with a glance of perfect understanding, she unfastened the door, and left it ajar.

She moved a little to the side of it and leaned back against the wall. Court took a step towards her, then another. He came to a halt just in front of her; he could now smell the scent of her body; he could sense the warmth of her skin, and see the rise and fall of her breasts as she breathed. The desire to touch her deepened and Court's body stirred. From the landing beyond, through the crack of the opened door, came the sound of the elevator. It whirled into life; the clankings and shiftings of machinery came from its shaft. Going up, or down? Court was unsure. He was almost certain that it would be twenty minutes at least before Colin Lascelles arrived, but since the woman had begun to move about his room time had slowed, so he might have been wrong.

The possibility of discovery excited him further, and the woman seemed to share that taste, or at least to accept it. An expression of quiet and concentrated complicity had now entered her eyes. Reaching forward, she took his hand and guided it inside her opened blouse. Her breasts had the unnatural jut that betrayed

silicone implants; beneath them, he could just feel the thin ridge of the enhancement operation's scar. This unnatural plasticity, he found, also excited him; the woman gave a small sharp intake of breath that might have indicated pleasure. Court moved his hand up so that it rested against the base of her neck; he exerted a faint pressure downwards. This signal, or suggestion, she responded to at once; she smiled, revealing pretty, perfect teeth, then, with a quick caress from her small pretty hand, and a glance that might have been one of triumph, she obeyed him without speaking, and knelt down in front of him on the floor.

'No, no, no,' said Colin, darting past his great-aunt Emily, who was intent on waylaying him. 'Emily, I can't talk now, I'll be late. I have to go . . .'

He snatched up the pile of photographs and notes for Tomas Court and, dodging furniture, made for the hall.

'Supposing there's a crisis?' Emily said, pursuing him. 'I ought to be able to reach you - in emergencies only, I understand . . .'

'Crisis? What crisis? Why should there be a crisis?' Colin cried, in desperate tones. 'Emily, I'll be *late*. Let me go . . .'

'Anything could happen!' Emily replied, somewhat dramatically. 'Supposing I died? Supposing I fell down the stairs? What about a heart attack? I expect a heart attack at any time, and if I had one, I might need to contact you . . .'

'*Christ*,' said Colin, rolling his eyes.

'I won't tell a soul. I swear I won't call - unless I am actually dying, obviously . . .' Emily paused. Her voice took on a wheedling tone Colin instantly recognized, since he himself used it when necessary, and knew it rarely failed.

'The Pierre? The Plaza? The Carlyle?'

'Give me a *break*,' cried Colin, opening the door.

was over. The brief allure the woman had possessed for him had now gone, and he was without further interest in her. His one concern now was to extricate himself as quickly as possible from this formulaic event, and, looking down at her, he was just considering which of his old formulaic devices would ensure her swift departure, when something caught his eye.

The woman was still kneeling, head bent, face hidden; during the course of her ministrations she had removed her blouse, which now lay beside her on the floor. As she bent forward to pick it up, Court's eyes rested on her bared back; he had been looking down at the discernible line of her spine as he assessed the best way to get rid of her; as she moved, the strands of dark hair that fell across her shoulders parted, and Court glimpsed – he was not sure what he glimpsed, but he heard himself make a small, disbelieving sound.

The woman's face jerked up towards him; she made another quick movement, but Court was too swift for her. Before she could rise, he stepped forward and forced her back down. With a low exclamation of anger and surprise, he parted the thick strands of dark hair, exposing her left shoulder. And no, he had not imagined it: there, in almost precisely the right place, high on the left scapula, was a tattoo – a tattoo of a small, crouching and delicate black spider.

He jerked away from her and pushed her aside. He stepped back, his face pale. Slowly, the girl straightened up. She wiped her hand across her mouth, met his gaze and frowned.

'I told you I admired your movies,' she said.

'That's a foolish way to express admiration. Write a letter next time. I'll make sure one of the secretaries answers it.'

'Write a letter?' Colour swept up into her face. 'That's what you advise? Mr Court, I'll remember that.'

She reached for her blouse, put it back on and began

to button it up. Court watched her in silence. When she had put her coat on also, and began to move towards the door, his anxieties eased somewhat. He began to tell himself that he had been lucky, that the risk had been greater than he had realized, but that the risk was over now. In the doorway, however, she paused.

'You don't remember, do you?' she said, resting her yellowish gaze on his, and voicing the question in a quiet tone.

'Remember what?' Court replied, moving further away.

'The last time we did this.' She looked slowly around the room; Court frowned.

'You're mistaken,' he began. 'I think it would be better if you went now. I told you—'

'Oh, *I'm* not mistaken, you are.' She hesitated, a shy, almost coy note coming into her voice. 'It's OK, I don't blame you. Why would you remember? I was blonde at the time. Quite a lot younger. It was very brief – nothing special, I guess, as far as you were concerned. Why would it be? I was the third that week, after all.'

'I don't know what you're talking about; we've never met. I don't even know your name . . .'

'It's Jackie.' She gave him a sidelong glance. 'No? Well, never mind. I understand how it is. I understood then. I mean, you were under a whole lot of pressure, I could see that. The great director! Only the movie wasn't going too well; you were having technical problems – problems with Natasha too, I think . . .'

The use of his wife's name startled Court and angered him.

'Whatever problems I was having,' he said coldly, 'I wouldn't have discussed them with you, I'm very sure about that. So—'

'No, you didn't.' She gave a low laugh. 'The way I recall it, you didn't say too much of anything. You fucked me that time . . .'

She paused, the tiny frown

here . . . I guess I came to see if you'd changed. You might have been different now. I thought . . .' She hesitated. 'You're older now; you're divorced. People say you're pretty ill – I guess I thought you might be – kinder, you know.'

'And do you find me altered?' Court asked, watching her closely.

'Oh no.' She glanced away. 'You're exactly the same. I never quite got you out of my head, you see – so I guess I wanted to be sure . . .'

'Maybe we should meet again,' he said, with care. 'You might revise your views. Do you have an address? A phone number? You live here in New York? I'm going to be in the city for a few more days . . .'

A small derisive smile flickered across her features. 'I have to go now,' she said. 'Maybe we'll run into each other – you never know . . .'

And with that, before he could prevent her, she was out of the door. She left it ajar; Court, knowing there were better methods of pursuit, did not attempt to follow her. He could still hear her footsteps on the stairs as he reached for the telephone and began dialling. Then another idea came to him. He replaced the receiver and picked up the videotape she had brought with her. His hands a little unsteady and his breathing tightening, he inserted it in his machine.

He had expected some message, some revelation, some clue. The tape was blank; discovering this, he reached again for the phone.

'Now,' Colin heard, through the door, as he reached Tomas Court's landing. 'I'm not interested – just find the records; they must be on file. I want to know her name and who hired her . . . I told you, *The Soloist* – that's five and a half years ago. You check the payroll records. What? No, I don't know. Try Wardrobe, Continuity, Make-Up . . . You think I don't realize that?

seemed blind to him – he gave a small dance of agitation and mouthed the words, ‘Late – have to go’.

Court gave no sign of receiving this message either; he had begun speaking again. Stealthily, Colin edged into the doorway. He was about to turn and flee when, after a pause Court said, ‘Ah, God, yes,’ and replaced the phone

The way in which he spoke halted Colin. There was a note of extremity in his voice which Colin had never heard before, and which awoke an instant anxiety. He began to realize that this was not an ordinary conversation, and that Court was in the grip of some strong emotion. Forgetting his cab and his haste for a moment, Colin saw that Court’s face was blanched of colour, and that he was now breathing with difficulty. As Colin turned back to him, he leaned against the table as if to steady himself, and stood there in silence, head bowed.

‘Tomas, are you all right?’ Colin began, moving towards him. ‘What’s happened? Here, sit down . . .’

He reached for a chair, but Court, straightening up and steadying his breathing, waved it aside.

‘Nothing’s wrong.’ His pale gaze rested on Colin’s for an instant. ‘Some problem’s come up – casting, nothing for you to worry about; not your concern. Those are the pictures I wanted? Thank you . . .’

‘Tomas, you don’t look well . . .’ Colin hesitated, gnawing his conscience. He thought of his late-night conversation with Court at the ranch, a few days before. He thought of the candour and bleakness with which Court had spoken of his love for his wife and his continuing hopes for a reconciliation. Colin had sensed it was the first time he had ever discussed this with anyone. He had pitied him then, and looking at Court’s drawn face, he pitied him now.

‘Let me call someone, Tomas,’ he said. ‘You shouldn’t be alone. Maybe I should call that doctor of yours, just to check you’re all right . . .’ He hesitated again, then

submitted to his conscience. 'I can stay,' he continued, 'if it would help. I can stay for a while . . .'

'I think not.' A flash of dour amusement came into Court's eyes. 'I appreciate the generosity of the offer, but you mustn't keep this Lindsay of yours waiting. I promised you you'd be on time - I don't want to break my word.'

'I can call her,' Colin began, trying hard to hide misery. 'Really, Tomas, she'll understand. You look ill - you're terribly pale.'

'It's nothing. It's passed. Off you go . . .'

He gave a dry smile. 'And I hope you've remembered a present. It is Thanksgiving, after all.'

Colin felt a rush of gratitude and liking. He thought of the elegant pale-blue Tiffany's box safely stowed in his bags.

'I have. I bought it in New York, the morning before I left for the ranch. Just in case I couldn't find anything in Montana . . .'

'Very wise. What one finds in Montana doesn't take too portable a form.' Court paused, then added, somewhat awkwardly, 'I hope you liked the ranch.'

'I did,' Colin replied.

'It's isolated, of course. My son loves it. Ah well.' He gave a sigh, held out his hand and clasped Colin's.

'Enjoy your Thanksgiving. I'll be speaking to you on Monday, in England, as arranged. And you can relax - it won't be before.'

Colin hesitated still, alarmed by something in his manner, by a note of resignation or fatigue he had not heard in Court's voice before. With another dry smile, Court turned away from him and took out the photographs he had requested. He waved Colin away and Colin, moving towards the door, watched him bend over these images of a bleak northern landscape. He thought of Thalia's assertion that Tomas Court was without friends. He could believe that. Court seemed to him to

be a man inexperienced at intimacy, slow to trust, and awkward at indicating regard. His attempts to convey liking, both at the ranch and now, touched Colin. He wished Court goodbye, unease and affection tugging at his heart.

Then he remembered Lindsay; his spirits rising at once, he sprinted down the stairs and out to his cab. He told the driver to get him uptown to the Plaza by the best route, and to break every record when doing so. The driver, amused by this demented Englishman, duly did so. Half an hour later, all thoughts of Tomas Court forgotten, Colin was walking into the lobby at the Plaza, his heart beating hard.

He was five minutes late. Meeting Lindsay, who was waiting for him, and who sprang to her feet as soon as he entered, he saw that she was even more nervous than he was. He took her hand, which felt small and cold, in his own. He watched colour come and go in her face; her eyes rested on his, their expression dazed and a little afraid. Colin, who had planned an amusing speech, found he was struck dumb; he could say nothing at all.

He booked them both in under the name 'Lascelles', told the desk clerk to hold all calls until further notice, overtipped the porter who showed them to their room, and, the second the man departed, fixed the 'Do Not Disturb' notice to the door.

He locked it. Lindsay had retreated, he saw; she had gone away, past a table decked with flowers, and was standing in front of the tall windows that overlooked Central Park. Joy welled up in Colin's heart. She was wearing a new dress, and a coat he had not seen before; they were black, like most of her clothes. She was smaller than Colin remembered, and slighter in build; with a sudden sense of her frailty, he saw that her small white hands were tightly clasped at the waist of her funereal coat. He saw the anxiety flare in her eyes, and he sensed a new defencelessness in her. At this he felt

'The truth is – I love *you*,' he said quietly. 'I expect you've realized that. I tried to hide it when I wrote, and it couldn't be done. I meant to hide it now too – and I can't do that either. I love you so much it actually hurts. That's never happened to me before.'

Lindsay, moved by a sadness in his expression, by the directness and simplicity of his words, felt a rush of pure affection for him flood her heart. She gave a small flurried gesture of the hands; she raised her eyes to his, then looked quickly away. 'Oh God,' she began, her voice catching. 'You mustn't – I can't – I don't know who I am any more, Colin . . .'

Colin was hurt by that reply, but he hid it; it seemed to him that words were better avoided now. In a way that brooked no argument, he drew her to her feet and took her in his arms. He began to kiss her, and that kiss silenced them both. Feeling blind with sudden happiness, and certain he could see a similar blindness in her eyes, he caught her against him. He felt a mad conviction that they had no need for words, and that the language of his body was one she must understand.

He began to make love to her, in ways which he had had 101 hours to dream of and plan. By the time this eloquence was finally over, it was dark in the city outside, and a full moon was riding above the bare trees in Central Park. Lindsay, her body pleased, and her mind in disarray, gave a small cry of loss as he withdrew from her. She felt both broken and whole. In a frantic way, she began to press kisses against his throat and his chest, and to murmur endearments; taking his hand, with mingled sadness and happiness, she began to kiss his face, and his eyes, and his hair.

Colin's heart lifted; he felt a certainty of purpose, a contentment, and a calm deeper than he had ever known. He kissed Lindsay with great tenderness, then, having learned when it was wiser to remain silent, lay with her clasped against him, making no comment and

asking no questions, when she began to weep quietly in his arms.

'Rowland, you are handsomer than ever,' said Emily Lancaster, regarding him with affection and pouring him a very large bourbon indeed. Rowland, who was standing at the window of her drawing-room, did not respond. 'Close the curtains, would you?' Emily continued. 'I don't like to see the moon through glass; it's unlucky . . .'

'That's only when it's a new moon,' Rowland replied. He watched the trees move in the darkness of the Park, then obeyed her instruction. Emily, who had been watching him thoughtfully, moved across to the sofa. 'Now come sit down,' she said. 'You must be exhausted – that long flight. Lord only knows what time it is by your body clock. Are you sure you won't let Frobisher get you something to eat? No? Rowland, my dear, I'm sure you must be suffering jet lag – even a man of your determination can't face that down.'

Rowland made some polite disclaimer. He seated himself beside her on the sofa; Emily budging her pug with a smile. She inspected him closely, putting on one of her pairs of spectacles to do so; she gave a small frown.

'Yes, you've definitely improved with age,' she pronounced. 'You have a dangerous look about you these days. An air of *perturbation*. I've always found *perturbation* attractive in a man. If I were forty years younger, Rowland, I'd fall madly in love with you, and we could have a *very* incautious affair.'

Rowland looked at Emily with affection; in the five years since he had last seen her, she had considerably aged. She could no longer hold herself as straight as she had once done, but her spirit, he sensed, was as indomitable as ever. He thought of the first time he had met her, when she came over to Oxford for Colin's

graduation. At sixty-five, she had been magnificent; and at eighty-five, wrapped in a shawl of heathery-coloured tweed, she was still magnificent. Rowland could see, though, the distortions time had made to her hands and spine; suspecting she might be in pain, he pitied her for the ravages of the last twenty years.

Liking her, and also knowing how astute she was, he tried to shake off his own exhaustion and despondency, to rally himself and respond.

'If you were forty years younger, Emily,' he said, 'you'd be playing havoc with my heart. And I wouldn't risk an affair: I'd propose.'

Emily smiled at this. 'Smartest move you could make,' she said. 'I'm one of the few women I know who could cope with you. I'd sort you out in no time. I'd be more than a match for you. What you need, Rowland, is a woman who's ten jumps ahead of you the entire time.'

'Do I?' Rowland said, giving her a glinting, green-eyed glance that made even Emily's eighty-five-year-old heart beat appreciably faster. 'Do I indeed?'

'My dear, it is very good *indeed* to see you.' Emily laughed. 'I'd forgotten how well you flirted. Wicked man! This is a pleasure – an unexpected one, too . . .'

'Yes, I had to leave London rather suddenly. It was a last minute thing.'

'What did you say brought you to New York, my dear?'

'Work,' said Rowland, who had not previously explained his presence. 'My paper's negotiating various link-ups with the *Times* here. We've suddenly run into a few problems.'

'How exciting. Oh dear.'

'So I came over to – finalize things.'

'Of course. But won't everyone be away, my dear? It is Thanksgiving tomorrow after all.'

'That shouldn't present any difficulties.'

Emily raised her eyebrows, but taking pity on him,

and he felt in limbo now. The two men had denied all knowledge of Lindsay's present whereabouts. Grimly, Rowland had booked himself in to the small cell that was the only room available there over Thanksgiving, and had started telephoning. Twenty calls later, he still had no information and no leads. As a last resort, he obtained Markov's Manhattan number from a giggling Pixie, in London, and dialled it. He did not expect a kind reception, nor did he get one.

'Looking for Lindsay?' Markov trilled, in his most infuriating tone. 'Too thrilling, my dear. I always *wondered* when you'd get round to it.'

'Where is she?' Rowland said, swallowing his pride. 'I need to talk to her and I need to talk to her *now*.'

'Can't help, I'm afraid.'

'Please,' said Rowland.

'Not a word I ever expected to hear on *your* lips,' cried Markov, detectable triumph in his tones. 'How are the mighty fallen, my dear.'

'Fuck it, Markov – where is she?'

'Sweetheart, I *genuinely* don't know. Tucked up in a love-nest somewhere, I suspect. With the new in-amorato. I can't *wait* to meet him. He sounds too charming for words.'

'Markov – have you ever been desperate?'

'Of *course*, darling. Most of the time.'

'Well, I'm desperate. No doubt that delights you. Help me out, here.'

Markov made a considering noise. 'I'm seeing a little cabin in the woods,' he said, in a maddening way. 'Could it be out of state? Yes, I think so. A *cosy* little cabin, somewhere très discreet. An *intimate* little cabin, with log fires . . .'

'Christ, Markov—'

'Oh, all right.' Markov gave way to the temptation to cause trouble, a temptation he could never bear to

resist for very long. 'I'm seeing the Oak Room at the Plaza, tomorrow evening at seven; they get back then. Thanksgiving drinks, darling. Jippy and I get to vet the inamorato. I gather . . .' Markov lowered his voice. 'I gather he has auburn hair, hyacinthine curls, diabolic eyebrows, an Apollonian body, and a way with women . . .'

'What fool gave you that description?' Rowland said, in a violent tone.

'Can't *think*, darling. Someone who knows him pretty well, I guess. Have to go now. Byeee.'

Replacing the phone, Rowland realized that even he, with a journalist's persistence, could not call every hotel with cabins in America; besides, there was an easier way. He dialled Emily's number at once; as a result, here he was – jet-lagged, exhausted, afflicted with a sense of whirling futile momentum, going nowhere exceedingly fast.

'I'm sorry to miss Colin,' he said, interrupting Emily and unable to bear prevarication any longer. 'I hear he's staying out of state somewhere with Lindsay.'

'Ah,' said Emily, bending to fondle her pug. 'Yes indeed.'

'Have they been away long?'

'Well, now, I'm not really sure. Colin's being a little secretive . . .'

'He wasn't secretive when I telephoned before,' Rowland said, hearing the bitterness in his own voice and realizing that he was losing his capacity to dissemble. Lindsay, he thought, would not judge his untruths to be cool or flagrant now. He turned to look at Emily. 'I gather marriage is on the cards.'

'He is very much in love,' Emily replied, in a quiet, firm tone.

'And are his feelings returned?'

'That I cannot answer. Lindsay would not confide in me. Though I would say . . .' She paused and turned her

blue gaze steadily upon Rowland. 'I would say they were admirably suited to one another, wouldn't you?'

Rowland's reaction confirmed everything Emily had suspected, and told her all she needed to know. She saw his handsome face darken and an arrogant expression mask his dismay. He gave her a cold, green-eyed glance, and took a swallow of bourbon.

'I always find questions like that impossible to answer. They're foolish. Only two people can judge – and that's the two people concerned.'

'Well, I think they're made for each other,' Emily said, a little sharply; then, seeing the unhappiness in his eyes, she modified her tone. 'Consider,' she went on, 'they are both vulnerable; they are both innocents – and I do not mean that in a pejorative way. They both have an open, sunny, optimistic disposition, though Colin, of course, likes to dramatize his fears. They have a very similar sense of humour – which is very important indeed . . .'

She hesitated; Rowland, his face set, said nothing. Emily looked around her room, wondering whether to show him mercy or continue. She thought of her conversation here with Colin on the night she had first met Lindsay; love for her nephew, and protectiveness towards him, rose up in her heart. Continue, she decided, and began speaking again, ignoring the stony expression in Rowland's eyes.

'And then,' she went on, 'there are the long-term considerations. Lindsay is not in her first youth. She has one miserable marriage behind her. For twenty years, she has had to bring up a child alone. She has a resilience, and a determination I admire – and they would be of great benefit to Colin . . .'

'They would be of benefit to anyone who married her.'

'Indeed.' Emily gave him a sharp glance. 'But Colin has admirable qualities too, let us not forget that. With

Colin, she could rely on unswerving loyalty and devotion . . .

'I'm sure she would repay that in kind.'

'No doubt. My point is that with Colin she could be secure. He would be faithful, loving and considerate. He would make the very best of husbands . . .' She paused, then added, in a delicate way, 'Not all men are husband material, wouldn't you say?'

'I'd say appearances can be deceptive in that respect,' Rowland answered, somewhat roughly.

Emily made no reply, but continued to look at him, her expression kindly but perplexed; she gave a sigh.

'Well, well, I am very old now,' she said, in a quiet way, 'I look at these things differently from you, no doubt. I love Colin; his future happiness and well-being are very close to my heart.' She paused. 'I'm sure you will understand that, since you and Colin are such close friends, and have been for so many years.'

Rowland heard the undisguised note of warning in her voice; his eyes met hers.

'I also wish Colin well,' he began, in a stiff way. 'I like Colin and I respect him. I hope you know that—'

'Indeed I do. I also know what it is to experience a clash of loyalties. That is always painful, and especially so for an honourable man.'

Rowland coloured. 'I don't follow you,' he said, looking away.

'Oh, I think you do,' Emily said. She paused, her gaze resting thoughtfully on his face; then she made one of those lightning shifts of attack that Rowland remembered of old.

'You have thought of marrying, I imagine, Rowland?'

'I have thought of it. Yes.'

'And no doubt you would like children?'

'Yes, I would hope—' He stopped, suddenly seeing the unerring accuracy of her aim. He turned back to look at her. 'I would like to have a family, children —

yes. I have no family of my own. So I had hoped to have children one day.'

Emily gave a small inclination of her head. Rowland saw pity come into her eyes.

'Colin also wants this,' she said quietly. 'In many ways, and despite the life he's led, Colin is and always has been, a very domestic man. He loves his home and is never happier than when he is at home. With the right wife, and God willing, with children, there is no doubt in my mind that he would be completely fulfilled. Of course, in Colin's case, there are additional reasons – I suppose one would have to call them dynastic reasons – why he should want children. He may deny it, but I know how deeply it matters to him, and to his father, that he should be able to pass Shute on to his son and heir.'

'I know that. I know exactly how much that matters to him.' Hope had come into Rowland's eyes. 'So I would have thought that—'

'So would I.' Emily cut him off with a small lift of her hand. Seeing her expression change, Rowland felt a second's foreboding; he could see that she was perhaps tiring, but she clearly intended to say something more, and knew it would be unwelcome. She looked at him with gravity and compassion, then sighed.

'You are an intelligent man, Rowland. No, sit down; there's something I want to tell you before you go. This question of children, of heirs. You should know – I discussed that very issue with Colin, here in this room, on the night he introduced me to Lindsay. I reminded him of Shute and the length of time his family has lived there. I reminded him of the entail . . .' She paused. 'I didn't use the word sacrifice to him then, but I will use it to you now.' She paused.

'To contemplate marriage to a woman who might, unhappily, be unable to bear a child, is perhaps the greatest sacrifice Colin could make. Yet he intends to

eighty-five-year-old mind felt fearful, and every one of her eighty-five-year-old bones seemed to ache.

She had suspected this conversation might be necessary as soon as Rowland telephoned and announced his arrival in New York; she had known, beyond doubt, that it was necessary when he entered, and she saw the expression on his face. She had begun this conversation feeling very sure of her ground, but now an old woman's incertitude gripped her. Confronted by the evidence of pain – and a man's pain, which she found harder to witness than a woman's – her mind felt flurried, muddled, and flooded with doubts.

'Rowland,' she began. 'Rowland, I'm so very sorry. Listen to me—'

'No, *I'm* sorry.' Rowland, his back to her, fought to steady his voice. 'You were right earlier. I'm desperately tired. I should take myself off . . .'

'I wish you wouldn't. At least stay and finish your drink.' She gave him an anxious look, then, as he slowly turned, held out her hand to him. 'If you go now, I'll feel I've offended you.'

'You certainly haven't done that.'

He hesitated, then, with a gentleness that surprised her, took her hand, with its bent and mishapen fingers, and held it in his own. Emily saw that he could still scarcely speak for emotion; she drew him down beside her, and looking at his drawn face, felt another flurry of remorse and doubts. Those who could not see beyond Rowland's appearance, she thought, were very foolish. Rowland McGuire was a considerable man, to whom Colin, and Colin's family, owed a debt. Who was she to judge whether he was, in her own glib phrase, husband material?

Marriage was a serious subject; love was a serious subject; the bearing of children was a more serious subject still: these issues determined the course of entire lives – what right did she have to meddle here? She was

partisan, and had in any case been too long retired from the fray; she had forgotten the agonies of love, and had no doubt underestimated them, for she was pre-occupied too often now with the more pressing concern of mortality and imminent death.

'Ah, Rowland, Rowland,' she said, laying her hand on his arm. 'I never married. I never had children. I'm old. I hadn't understood how strongly you felt. I shouldn't have spoken as I did.'

'No. I'm glad that you did.' He looked across the room. 'I can see now – I suppose I always could – Colin can offer her so much. Not just material things; I don't only mean that. Colin is generous at heart. And you're right, they are alike, in many respects. When they first met, I could see then . . . It's just that – well, I had thought – I had sensed—'

He broke off, and Emily, pitying him again, and knowing his pride, turned her gaze away from his. With skill and with tact, she diverted the conversation away from this subject to more neutral ones. Rowland, as anxious as she was to regain neutral ground before he left, followed this lead. Prompted by Emily, he began to talk of other things; Emily half listened to him, and half listened to something else.

At first, she was aware only of some shift and disturbance in the room – having lived so long in the Conrad, this was something to which she had long been accustomed. Attuned to the spirits of the building, both malign and benevolent, she could always sense when they became restless and stirred.

This they did, these days, more and more often. Emily attributed their more frequent activation to her own age, to the proximity of her own death, and to the fact that she no longer dismissed them as the products of her own fancy or superstition, as she had done in her youth.

The spirits here were always encouraged, she

believed, by perturbation in human beings. Perhaps Rowland had unwittingly summoned them up tonight; perhaps she herself had. She glanced at his now guarded, tense face, then looked down at the rug beneath her feet. It was an Aubusson, still beautiful, and patterned with faded roses; the dusky pink of these flowers, in this subdued light, darkened to the colour of blood. Tonight, these flowers, like the shadows in the room, teemed with abundant life. Emily's little dog could also sense this; she felt him stir beside her, and his hackles rise up. She concentrated on the other conversation she could now hear, which she realized had been continuing for some while, beyond and above the sound of Rowland's quiet voice. She tried to hear what was being said, in that other anterior exchange – and something was being said; she could half hear it, emanating from this carpet's warp and weft.

She began to distinguish first a man's, then a woman's voice; their words were muffled, but the reproach and pain in their voices were not. Gradually, as she listened, stroking her little dog and wondering if this message might be indirectly meant for herself, she heard that the woman's voice had come to dominate; Emily listened as an aria of accusation mounted, then faltered. There was a silence, then a long cry of uncertain gender, a cry which might have signified desolation, or delight, or distress.

'What was that?' Rowland said sharply.

Looking up, Emily realized how deeply she had been abstracted. Rowland had brought their conversation to a close without her being aware of it; he had risen, and must have been moving towards the door, when he spoke. She looked at him uncertainly, confused and surprised that he should have heard this sound, one with which she had become familiar, and which she believed to be the cry of a woman long dead. It would scarcely do to inform Rowland, a rational man, that the voice

was Anne Conrad's. He would assume that age had finally taken its toll on Emily, that she was losing her wits.

She gave herself a little shake and opted for the pragmatic answer, realizing as she did so that it could well be correct. After all, according to Frobisher, who had it from the porter, Giancarlo, Tomas Court was at present in the building; he was in the apartment below this one, visiting his former wife.

'Oh, just a marital argument,' she said in a dry way, recovering herself and holding out her hand to him.

'I wish you well, Rowland. I wish you wisdom, my dear.' She paused. 'When will you be returning to England?'

'I haven't decided yet.'

'I see.' She released his hand. Somewhere in the building a door slammed. Emily shivered.

'It's darned cold tonight,' she said. 'You'll have to take the stairs, Rowland, the elevator's playing up again.'

'I've already discovered that.'

'I dislike those stairs myself.' She huddled her shawl more tightly around her. 'Well, well, you're a good man, Rowland. I'm glad you came—'

Rowland hesitated. 'Are you all right, Emily?'

'Fine. I'm just fine. A little tired maybe.' She picked up her tiny dog, and kissed his crinkled sagacious brow. Still Rowland hesitated, suddenly concerned for her; he looked about the shadowy room and felt unease furl its wings about him.

Emily waved him away, her diamond ring catching the light.

'Goodbye, my dear,' she called after him, as he stepped out into the hall. Rowland passed out onto the galleried landing, with its brandishing arms and inadequate light. He descended the stairs, looking neither

to left or right, and left the building. Snow had been falling, he discovered, stepping out onto a thin crust of white. There was an unnatural hush about the city, and more snow would fall during the night.

XIV

'What time is it in England now, Colin?'

With a sigh, Lindsay disentangled herself from his arms; she extricated herself from the tumbled sheets and, sitting up naked and cross-legged, reached for the bedside telephone and began dialling.

'Five hours ahead of us,' Colin replied, yawning, stretching, then sitting up and kissing the back of her neck. 'I've no idea what time it is here, though,' he added, beginning to kiss each disc of her spine. 'It could be yesterday, or next week.'

'It's six-fifteen. Six-fifteen! How can that be? What happened to the afternoon?'

'Darling, what happened to the morning?'

'They merged,' Lindsay said, giving him a mischievous glance. She replaced the receiver, then redialled. 'And now we have to reform. The others will be arriving soon. We have to shower and get dressed and go downstairs and be respectable. Gini's always horribly punctual . . . Damn! Tom's not answering . . .'

'Tell me about Gini,' Colin said, beginning to kiss the back of her ear. 'Will I like her?'

'Probably. She's beautiful, so most men tend to like her - on sight.' She replaced the receiver. 'Bother. I can't get Tom, and I wanted to speak to him. He flew back from Edinburgh this evening. I wanted to know he was safe. Now I'll worry about his flight.'

'No, you won't.' Colin put his arms around her waist. 'Darling, he has this number. It's past eleven in

Oxford. If there were any problem, he or Katya would have called.'

'That's true.' Lindsay's face brightened. 'I'll try him in the morning, before we leave for the airport.' Her face became thoughtful. 'Colin, tomorrow we'll be in England . . .'

'I don't care where we are,' Colin said, 'as long as I'm with you.'

'You comfort me.' In an impulsive way, she took his hand in hers. 'You comfort me, Colin. I feel happy. I woke up this morning next to you – and I felt content. The day felt full of promise and prospects. I'd forgotten a day could feel like that.'

Dazzled by the expression in her eyes, and too joyful to speak, Colin drew her into his arms. Lindsay rested her head against his shoulder; he began to kiss her hair; her use of the word 'comfort', which had surprised him, stirred some memory. For a moment he could not place it, then it came to him. 'Comfort me with apples,' he murmured, beginning to stroke her breasts. 'My beloved is mine . . . I forget the rest. Something about lilies . . .'

His body stirred, and Lindsay gave a sigh of pleasure; her mouth opened under his.

'Darling, we mustn't, we mustn't – it's so late . . .'

'Let them wait.'

'Colin – no. We shouldn't. I – Oh God, that's not fair. We can't, not *again*. I can't go down like this. I have to have a shower. I smell of sex. Darling, stop – they'll know what we've been doing . . .'

'They'll know anyway.' Colin smiled. 'It shows in your eyes, and mine. I know that.'

'In my eyes? It can't do. Oh, yes . . .'

'It does. It's flagrant. I can see every possible declension of sex in your eyes. Past, present, future – passive and active form. Has fucked, will be fucked – it's beautiful, and it's the most erotic thing I've ever seen in my life . . .'

'Well, perhaps if we're very quick,' Lindsay said.

'Are you still anxious, Jippy?' Markov asked, catching a glimpse of Jippy's pale face over his shoulder, in his hallway mirror. They were preparing to leave for the Plaza, and Markov was in the process of selecting a hat.

'Don't be, darling.' He turned. Jippy was wearing a neat suit that made him look like a minor accountant; Markov, moved by this, took his hands fondly in his. He hesitated. 'It will all be all right – won't it?'

Jippy did not reply. He could not explain, even to Markov, how it felt to see the aura of future events. For days, ever since they had returned from Crete, he had been afflicted by the buzzings and whisperings and seethings that signified unrest. That morning, he had woken from disturbed sleep to a sense of paralysing fear. He had watched some dark shape lumber across the room, and he had smelled evil. Evil had a precise smell, a distillation of iron, burning and salt. It was not a noxious odour, and Jippy suspected others might find it bracing, like sea air, but it left him feeling sick and lethargic, aching at his own impotence, knowing he could glimpse troubles, but that his powers were limited. The troubles, he could foresee, but could not prevent.

As yet, and as usual, the shape of those troubles were still vague; their proximity was now giving him an acute headache, for which he had already taken several doses of codeine, without effect. Standing next to Markov now, he was seeing fizzles and flashes of blinding light; he wished they would go away; he blinked.

Markov, having decided on a black fedora, turned to look at him again. When they were alone together, and only when they were alone, Markov abandoned his affectations of speech.

'I love you, Jippy,' he said.

'I l-love you back,' Jippy replied in a stout way; his stammer improved when they were alone also; Markov's

term for this shared phenomenon was the 'Certainty Effect'.

'Does your head still hurt, darling?'

Jippy nodded; Markov put his arms around him. 'I'll make the pain go away,' he said, kissing Jippy's neat dark hair, then stroking it. 'There – is that better?'

Jippy nodded; the pain, indeed, diminished when Markov held him.

'Well, *I* won't do anything to make things worse, I promise you that.' Markov looked at Jippy in a penitent way. 'I won't say a word out of place – for once. Not even to Rowland, if he turns up. Is he going to turn up, Jippy?'

Jippy did not know the answer to that question, and the minute Markov released him, the sharp stabbing pain had returned to his head.

Markov opened the front door of his small, smart East Side town house.

He grimaced at the sidewalk, and then at the sky.

'Can you believe it? It's snowing again,' he said.

Further south, Rowland stood at the window of his cell at the Pierre, and looked out at the dark sky. He had showered, shaved, exchanged one dark suit for a different one, and was still irresolute. Stay or go? Risk or retreat? It was approaching seven, and he remained undecided. The scales were almost exactly balanced. On the one side was the loyalty he felt towards Colin, given added weight by the reason and dispassion of Emily's arguments; on the other were his own hopes and desires – and instincts, of course.

A decisive man, Rowland hated indecision; he despised it in others and he despised it even more in himself. He took out Lindsay's letter to him, hoping it might resolve the issue. When first read, in London, it had seemed capable of only one interpretation; now, interpretations swarmed. With a dull misery, he saw that

'We *can't* stay long. We have to be back here for dinner. This is a crazy arrangement – what if Lucien wakes up?'

'Darling, he won't. And if he does, the others will look after him. He'll be thoroughly spoiled. Don't you want to meet Lindsay's new man? I do. I'm intrigued.'

'Women usually are by that kind of thing. It bores me to distraction. I wish them well – beyond that, I couldn't care less.'

'Well, I could. I'm interested. It's all so sudden. And I'd begun to suspect she was interested in someone else.' She paused, looking at her own reflection. 'Someone very unsuitable – he wouldn't have suited her *at all*. So I'm glad she's seen sense.'

Pascal did not reply. He moved across to the window, drew back the curtains and looked out. This apartment, on the fourth floor of a brownstone on Riverside Drive, overlooked the Hudson. River and sky now blurred together; the air was thick with snow. Turning away, his manner edgy and irritable, he began to pace.

His wife watched him do so in the mirror. Carefully, she screwed two pearl ear-rings into place. She knew what was wrong with her husband, and it had very little to do with the meeting with Lindsay: Pascal was beginning to feel caged by domesticity. Once they began work on their book, this feeling would lessen, but it would not disappear altogether, and she was beginning to realize that.

'You're missing your wars, Pascal,' she said, hearing her own voice strike exactly the wrong note.

'My wars?' He gave her a sharp look. 'The wars aren't of my making; I merely photograph them.'

'You're missing them, nonetheless. Pascal—'

'I miss doing what I do best, possibly.' His tone was cold. 'Gini, we really should go. Surely you're ready by now?'

Gini experienced a tiny moment of fear. She looked

at her own face in the mirror; she felt she was stepping through the glass and watching history repeat. This was the pattern of his first broken marriage; his first wife, Helen, being informed by Gini that Pascal had decided to end his coverage of wars, had smiled a small tight smile.

'Gini, dear,' she said. 'What a victory for you! I hate to say it, but I give it six months before he reverts.'

It was more than six months; it was nearly two years.

'Pascal - you promised me . . .' she said.

'I know, I know, I know.' He gave her a long, still, penetrating look. 'You extracted that promise from me after Lucien's birth. You always have good timing.'

'What's that supposed to mean?'

'Nothing, my darling. Just that, with marriage to you, I've realized how tenacious you are. You usually end up getting what you want, don't you, Gini?' He gave her a regretful, measuring look, then gave a shrug. Dropping a kiss on her brow, he moved to the door.

'We really must leave. Who else did you say was going to be there?'

'Just Lindsay and this Colin man. And Markov and Jippy.'

'Thank God for that. I like Jippy.'

'Do you still love me, Pascal?' She rose.

'Still? That sounds defeatist. Of course I do. You know that.' He took her hand as she reached his side and looked at her closely. 'And now you've finally made me into what you wanted, do you still love me? No regrets?'

'Of course I do.' She hesitated. 'And everyone has regrets occasionally, Pascal. They mean nothing at all.'

'Don't they? Tell me, do your regrets take a specific shape?'

'No. Certainly not.'

'Good.' Her husband's cool grey eyes rested on her face. His wife did not intentionally deceive others. he

thought, but he was learning how good she was at deceiving herself. 'Then we have nothing to worry about. An ideal couple. Destined for each other from the first.' He spoke in a light tone, feeling suddenly tired. 'We must leave, Gini. Come on – we'll be late.'

'Good evening,' Emily said, in crisp tones, to the tall man standing outside the elevator. Behind her, a maid closed the door to Henry Foxe's elegant apartment, on the tenth and top-most floor of the Conrad building. The sounds of merriment from the cocktail party beyond were cut off. Emily eyed the man and felt a spurt of gossipy interest. This was her first proper sighting of Tomas Court, the ex-husband. He too had been present at the Foxe Thanksgiving party, but since he had not spoken once, and had lingered at its edges throughout, that sighting did not count.

'Going down?' he said.

Emily looked at the ceiling.

'Well, I surely can't go *up*,' she said tartly.

'No, I guess not.' Tomas Court smiled.

Emily tucked her crocodile purse under her arm and adjusted her fur, a fur which several lynxes had died to make. It gave her a wild, bristling appearance, and it had been the height of fashion in 1958. She gave Tomas Court one of her unabashed sweeping glances, and to her surprise, found herself impressed. She could see fatigue on his face, but she liked his eyes, his greying, close-cropped hair, the quietness of his demeanour, and his air of constraint.

Very different kettle of fish to the *wife*, Emily said to herself. The wife, ravishing in some pink creation, was still lingering at Henry Foxe's party. Though she had said little, and her manner was modest enough, she liked to be the centre of attention – or so Emily, unsympathetic to beautiful women, had thought. She had had Henry Foxe running around in circles, proffering

paused, frowning. 'I know what it is to be haunted,' he added, in an off-hand way, 'so I would notice, I guess.'

'It has got *worse*', Emily continued, with asperity, 'since your wife arrived. I have my suspicions about the elevator also. There is a definite *malevolence* in its breaking down when it does. I, of course, was the sole person on the board committee to vote against admitting your wife.'

'So I heard.'

'*Most* strange, the manner in which she obtained the other four votes.'

'Not so strange. My wife seduces people – as you've seen tonight.' His manner remained imperturbable, his tone flat. 'She made a number of donations to various causes, I understand; they happened to be the pet causes of two of your committee members, and they were large donations, but then my wife is now very rich. Jules McKechnie advised her as to which causes, I think . . .'

'Juliet McKechnie?' Emily gave a rude snort. 'I can't abide that darned woman. Never could. She's smart, however. One of *the* McKechnies – which she trades on, of course.'

'Ah, I see.' He glanced over his shoulder. 'I hadn't realized until tonight – I was confused by the name. I'd heard my wife's broker was a man . . .'

'Then you weren't far wrong,' said Emily, in a dry voice.

'As to the two other committee members,' he continued, giving no sign of hearing her last remark, 'Mr Foxe was gently wooed, but then he is widowed, and no doubt lonely, and Natasha would have seen how easily frightened he is . . .' He paused. 'Does Mr Foxe have a daughter, by any chance?'

'He did have. His only child. She died.'

'I see. I expect my wife would have known that. She is always well-informed . . .' His eyes moved along the shadows of the galleries. 'As for Biff Holyoake, well,

handsome face was flushed, and her grey hair in disarray; this boded ill. She opened her mouth to explain she had just met the great director, the peculiar ex-husband, and a most *intriguing* man he was, then was silenced as Frobisher gave her a beady look.

'That darned telephone has never quit ringing since you left,' Frobisher said, enunciating the words with a clarity that presaged trouble. 'No way can I answer the telephone and cook.'

'No, of course you can't, Froby,' Emily said in a small humble voice.

'Problems!' Frobisher said darkly. '*Developments* – and Colin's not going to like them, I can tell you that.'

'Oh dear,' said Emily, hiding her hand behind her back.

'*Ruptions*,' Frobisher said, more darkly still. 'I've been railroaded; ruptions – that's what I predict . . .' She looked at Emily fiercely. 'And there'll be more ruptions if you keep eating my corn muffins. Put that back.'

'My lord, did you *see* Emily Lancaster's coat?' Juliet McKechnie said, in a low voice, taking Natasha Lawrence's arm, as they reached the second-floor landing of the Conrad.

'Ssssh.' Natasha laughed. 'Keep your voice down. We shouldn't be doing this, Jules.'

'It made her look like a grizzly bear, didn't you think?' Juliet also laughed. 'Magnificent, though, in her way. And she can't stand me – which is a pity. She's an old tartar, but I've always had a soft spot for her . . .'

'Why can't she stand you?' Natasha said, taking out a key and opening a small, unmarked door around the corner from the entrance to Emily's apartment. She laid her finger on her lips. 'And keep your voice *down*.'

'My grandmother snaffled Henry Foxe from under her nose.' Juliet smiled. 'This would have been around 1452.'

'I'd never have dared buy it without you.' Natasha lowered her eyes. 'I'd have argued myself out of it.'

'You have to learn to trust yourself. And you *are* learning. But you haven't been out of prison very long yet. It takes time . . .'

'Juliet, don't. Don't. That isn't fair to him—'

'If you say so.' Juliet gave a little shrug. 'But it's beautiful, Natasha. All of it's beautiful.' She hesitated. 'And you're beautiful too, darling. I've never seen you look lovelier than you look tonight.' Turning, she rested her hands either side of Natasha's face, then tilted it up, to hers. She stroked the heavy dark hair back from the pale forehead; she examined the delicate brows, the wide-set grey eyes raised anxiously to her own. Drawing Natasha into her arms, she kissed her on the lips.

The kiss, prolonged, sweet to both, became impassioned.

Natasha, with a low cry, was the first to draw back. 'Darling, we mustn't, we mustn't,' she said. 'I mustn't be too late – and he'll know. One look at me, and he'll know—'

'He's going to have to know, sooner or later.' Juliet drew her closer again. Bending forward, she kissed Natasha's throat, parted her dress a little more, and kissed each of her breasts. Then, with a dry smile and a mocking glance, she fastened the dress again and held Natasha at arm's length.

'There? You see? The picture of modesty. Brush your hair, tie it back, and he'll never know. He doesn't really see you anyway, Natasha. He sees his idea of you . . . And his idea of you doesn't include me, I'm sure of that. I was standing next to you at that party, wanting you, thinking about the other night – and he never noticed a thing.' She smiled. 'Too busy keeping a jealous eye on your sweet handsome bodyguard, I think.'

'Maybe.' Natasha gave a small frown. 'Don't underestimate him, though, Juliet. Tomas *sees* – but he always

sees from such strange viewpoints.' She hesitated. 'Juliet, he's such a fine director—'

'He's a great director. I wouldn't deny that. I don't object to him when he's behind a camera. I do object to him when he's directing your life.'

'I know, I know. But — ah, Juliet, I did love him once. I loved him so much . . .'

Colour winged its way into her pale face as she said this; she turned away with a sigh. Juliet watched her as she began to move about the room, with her customary grace, but with a certain agitation. She moved towards the bed, then the window, where she looked out at the falling snow. Juliet waited.

'I will tell him, Juliet,' she said, in an impulsive way, turning back. 'I've been trying to tell him for months. I've tried to prepare him, make him see I can't have him here, I can't have him back. But he won't listen to me. I say it and I say it, and he drowns me out.' She gave Juliet a sad look. 'That's what it's like. Tomas is listening to a different symphony, a different orchestra . . .'

'One he's conducting, of course.'

'I guess so.' She gave a wan half-smile. 'But give him credit, Juliet. I'm sure the music is sublime — all those instruments: flutes, cellos, trumpets, violins — music to break your heart, I expect. But I want — I want something quieter, smaller.' She gave a tiny resigned gesture. 'Just a sextet. A quartet. A trio . . .'

She gave Juliet a small glance. 'Who knows? I expect I'd settle for a duet.'

'All of those can be exquisite,' Juliet said, in a measured way, hearing in Natasha's tones something that might have been anger, or irony, or regret.

'Yes, yes,' Natasha said.

'You're an artist too,' Juliet continued, after a pause, and with some sharpness. 'He doesn't have a monopoly on art, Natasha.'

'No, no. I'm a good actor, I know that. But I'm better

when he's directing me, and I'm better still when he's written the script.'

'I'm not listening to this.' Juliet moved away to the dressing-table, and looked at herself in the glass. She adjusted the jacket of her chic, dark suit, smoothed back her short, sleek, dark hair, and reapplied an angry red colour to her lips.

'I love you,' she said, looking at Natasha's reflection in the glass and frowning.

'I'm beginning to love you.' Natasha paused. 'You give me strength.'

'I'd give you more if you'd let me,' Juliet replied, turning and kissing her gently. 'Now I'm going to take myself off. I'll leave you with that sacred monster of yours. Call me in the morning. Will he be staying late?'

'I'm not sure. He wants to talk about Joseph King again.' Natasha gave a weary gesture. 'He thinks he knows who he is. He went on and on about it for hours, last night. It makes me so miserable and afraid . . . Shall I tell you something, Juliet?'

'What, darling?'

'I used to think – there was a time, just before I left Tomas . . . No, I can't say this.'

'Darling, tell me.'

'I thought Tomas was King. I thought he was sending those letters, making those calls. I don't know why I thought that; it wasn't rational. Sometimes King would call when Tomas was in the room with me. It wasn't Tomas's voice, it wasn't Tomas's writing, and Tomas would never make threats against Jonathan – but I came to associate them, somehow.' She gave a small sigh. 'I was very close to going mad, then, I think. I can't tell you what it was like. I always felt watched, overheard . . .' She glanced over her shoulder. 'I thought I'd escape from that once I was here. But Tomas comes, and talks and talks – and he's brought it all in here too . . .'

'Darling, don't cry. Don't get upset – look, do you

want me to stay? I will. The hell with him and what he thinks—'

'No. No.' Natasha gently pushed her away. 'I'll be fine. Angelica will be back by midnight. That nice Maria girl's coming to sit with Jonathan . . .'

'Does Tomas know that?'

'Of course not. He'd say I was smothering Jonathan – pandering to his fears. He usually says that; he says there are too many women around his son. But Jonathan wakes up and he gets frightened, so it's better if she's here. She has the key to the little door upstairs. Tomas need never know . . .'

Juliet smiled and raised an eyebrow.

'It's *easier* that way,' Natasha said, with a wry look. 'We avoid another scene. I learned the advantages of stealth two months into my marriage . . .'

'Darling. Most women do,' Juliet said.

'Catullus?' Colin said, looking down at the book of poems that Lindsay had just presented as her Thanksgiving gift. He frowned; there was a narrow silk marker to the book, so it fell open at a particular page. On that page was the love poem he had quoted to Lindsay in one of his Montana faxes. Colin gave a sigh; one diabolic eyebrow rose.

'You evil woman,' he said. 'You evil, devious, wicked woman.'

Lindsay, who was wearing her red dress and her new Thanksgiving Tiffany ear-rings, hid her smile; she gave him a meek look.

'Ah yes, Latin,' she said. 'I can read it. I had it rather dinned into me at school . . . For eight years, in fact.'

'You lied, in other words.'

'Colin, I did.'

'“Et al – I realize I do know some Latin after all”?' Colin began to smile. 'Catullus. I knew you were a paragon.'

'You can quote from my letters, Colin?'

'Why not? You've just quoted mine. Which makes me suspect you read it more than once . . .'

'A couple of times, I admit. Nothing excessive . . .'

'I am *immoderately* happy,' Colin said, putting the book against his heart, and discovering it fitted the inside breast pocket of his masterly suit.

'I love you to distraction,' he continued, moving forward in a purposeful way. 'What's more, that dress is having a very strong effect on me . . .'

'This dress? Pixie hates it—'

'What does Pixie know? From a man's point of view, my darling . . .'

'Colin, no. Don't even *think* about it. We're more than five minutes late already. I—'

'Dear God, what's happening to me?' Colin said, five minutes after that. He detached himself from Lindsay. 'Is it happening to you too?'

'It is. Can't you tell?'

'Oh God. Yes I can.' Colin looked into her eyes. 'And I can't go downstairs like this. Quick, think of something detumescent, and say it.'

'Five hours at least until we get back to this room?'

'No good. No good. That makes it worse.'

'What are nine eights? Twelve fifteens? What's six and a half per cent of three hundred and twenty-nine? Why is the universe receding? What did Plato see on the walls of the cave? What was the name of Rochester's first wife? How many states in America? This must be working, Colin . . .'

'It's not. It's not. Stand further off.'

'What's the capital of Mozambique? Chad? Who killed Cassandra? Why? Which is the highest mountain range in Canada? What's the longest river in the world? The deepest lake? Why do I like you so much, Colin?'

'Now *that's* a truly interesting question,' Colin replied,

leading her from the room to the stairs and taking her hand in his.

'Do you know all the answers to those questions?' he asked, as they began to descend to the lobby.

'Some of them. Certainly not all.' Lindsay gave him a sidelong glance. 'I can answer the final one though.'

'Can you?'

Halfway down the stairs, Colin came to a halt. Below them, the lobby teemed with Thanksgiving celebrants. Oblivious to them, Colin turned her to face him. Tell me,' he said. 'Answer that question. We're not going downstairs until you do. Not if we have to stay here all night.'

Lindsay considered; lifting her hand, she laid it against his cheek; she began to speak in a low voice, hesitantly at first, then with growing conviction. Colin listened with absolute attention.

'Then?' he said. 'Is that true of most women? Why? You're sure? But I thought — Oh God. *God*. I can't think for happiness. Darling, listen to me—'

Colin began to speak in his turn, with no sign of hesitation, and a conviction that matched Lindsay's own. Having spoken, he leaned her back against the wall; he looked into her eyes for a long time; Lindsay laced her arms about his neck. Then, with a small sigh on her part, and a marked determination on his, he began to kiss her. This embrace, chaste, rapturous, sweet and prolonged, caused heads to turn. It was witnessed with indulgence, with envy, with nostalgia, annoyance and amusement by various guests — either because they were themselves in a similar state or because they could remember the joys and perils of being so.

It was also witnessed by Rowland McGuire who, as chance would have it, entered the lobby at that precise moment. It took him an instant to realize who this couple were; then he recognized the dress Lindsay was wearing. He turned away at once, and with some presence of

mind, attempted to lose himself in the crush of people. He had almost reached the exit, when his height and his haste betrayed him. Colin glimpsed him from the vantage point of the stairs, called his name, and hurried towards him, reaching his side before Rowland could escape.

He clasped Rowland's hands and began questioning him, his face bright. Rowland looked from him to Lindsay, who had slowly approached; he found their expressions dazed, secretive, radiant and unbearable. Mustering his self-possession, he managed an explanation so unnaturally precise he felt it could convince no-one; Colin, who had scarcely listened to it, accepted it at once.

'But that's great,' he said. 'I'm so *glad*. How lucky! You spoke to Markov? I expect he's already here. We're – well, we're a bit late. Why don't you go on through with Lindsay? You must join us for dinner, Rowland. We're going to Emily's. Frobisher always cooks enough for an army – Emily would never forgive me if you didn't come . . . No, no, don't be ridiculous. Stop *arguing*. You can't possibly spend Thanksgiving on your own. Lindsay, you tell him, darling. I'll just give Emily a quick call, so she can organize an extra place. You two go on through – I won't be two seconds . . .'

With which, Colin turned and darted away through the crowds. He had noticed neither Lindsay's expression, nor his friend's – but then, Colin was an innocent, as Emily had said.

A short while later, Lindsay found herself standing just outside the entrance to the Oak Room. She had no recollection of walking there, and she was almost certain that nothing had been said. All she could hear and see was the enormity of what was happening and the urgency of preventing it. People ebbed back and forth, separating her from Rowland, then tossing her back

towards him again. Fighting her way past a crowd of gaudily dressed women, she made it back to his side and laid her hand on the sleeve of his black coat.

'What are you doing here? Oh, what are you *doing* here?' she began. 'You have to go away – at once. *At once.*'

'I'm joining you for a drink. I've just explained why I'm here.'

'Oh God, why didn't you *call* me?'

'I've been trying to call you. For two days. I didn't know where you were.'

'Rowland – please leave. It's much better if you leave . . .'

'I won't leave. Not now.'

'Rowland – didn't Markov tell you who else was coming tonight?'

'No, why? Does it matter?'

'I think it might, yes. Rowland, listen—'

'I don't give a damn who's here,' Rowland said. 'I want to talk to you. I have to talk to you . . .'

'Now? You're mad. Rowland, let go of me. *Please* go away . . .'

Jerking his hand aside, Lindsay darted past him. She looked across the room beyond; she saw Markov and Jippy; she saw Gini and her husband. She was about to dart back out of sight, when Gini looked up and saw her. She began to smile a greeting, then the smile froze; she stared across the crowded room, her face blank with shock. Lindsay swung around to find Rowland at her side. Her agitation increasing, she began to speak; she attempted to push him back out of sight; she tugged at his sleeve; a small, frantic and undignified tussle took place.

The struggle was all on Lindsay's part; she had a confused sense of her hands plucking at his coat, and fluttering back and forth in a useless way, for Lindsay, a foot shorter than Rowland, was not particularly strong,

whereas Rowland was. He did not move by so much as an inch; Lindsay thought he was unaware of her pushings and tuggings; when he did suddenly become aware of them, he caught hold of her two wrists.

'What's the *matter* with you?' Lindsay began. 'Let go of me, for heaven's sake . . .'

She looked up. She knew then what was the matter, for the expression on his face and in his eyes could not be misconstrued. For one fleeting second, she thought that he had seen Gini; then she realized that he had *not* seen her, that he had not looked around once, that he was blind and deaf to his surroundings and that the expression on his face was caused by herself.

'I don't care,' he said, in a low voice. 'I don't care that this is the wrong time and the worst possible place. I'm not leaving until I've said this — and I'm going to say it before Colin returns—'

Lindsay heard herself make some small sound of disbelief; the noisy space filled with a tumultuous silence. Her heart began to beat fast. She looked up, met Rowland's green intent gaze, and had a brief rushing sensation of how unfairly, how impossibly handsome this man was. A figure from a romance she had been listening to since her earliest childhood. All the pain and hope and obsession of the past three years swirled in her head, and she realized that she was angry — so angry she could scarcely speak.

'Don't you dare say anything,' she said, in a low furious tone. 'Not before Colin returns. Not after. Don't you dare to say one single *word* . . .'

She saw Rowland flinch, as if she had just struck him, and angrily she shook her wrists free.

'Go away,' she said. 'Gini is here, and her husband is here. Colin is your *friend*. He trusts you. He's just . . . Oh, how can you do this? It's unforgivable, *unforgivable* . . .'

'Will you listen to me? I can explain—' Rowland

began, reaching for her hand again, but Lindsay had already dodged past him. She began to weave her way through the crush of people to their table, certain that Rowland would not follow her. She could still hear some sound, some rushing, crashing sound, like waves beating in on a beach, as she reached the table, and three men rose to their feet. She could feel the group was petrified with some collective embarrassment; she began on flurried greetings; she embraced Gini, then Markov, then Jippy. Turning to Pascal, whom she both admired and liked, she realized that he was not looking at her, but at someone else, his face hardening in an expression of anger and disbelief.

She began to turn, seeing as she did so that Jippy looked ill, and that Markov's face wore an expression of startled delight – an expression with which he always greeted incipient social disaster. Rowland McGuire was standing immediately behind her, she found, and next to him was Colin. Colin was pale with agitation; he looked as if he had just witnessed a car accident. He began to speak with great rapidity, a hunted, desperate look on his face.

'Oh, God, God,' he said, 'this is terrible. We have to move. We can't stay here. There isn't time to explain. This is a crisis, this is an *emergency*, oh, bloody *hell* . . .'

'Col, dear heart, *there* you are!' said a famous and melodious voice. Colin looked at the table in a panic-stricken way, as if considering diving under it. 'Too late. Oh *shit*.' He made a moaning sound, as an arm fastened itself around his shoulders. Lindsay found herself looking into a cadaverous, arresting, and very famous face.

'Col, I've been chasing you all over New York – where have you been *hiding* yourself? I've just come from the Thanksgiving bash at Tina's and Harry's. Thousands of scribes, Hollywood out in force . . . Marty was there and Michelle sent her love . . . Col. How *tremendously* well you're looking. Fit, lean, tanned. Water, water –

we'll need some more champagne over here. At your earliest convenience, if you'd be so good. Col, *great* to see you. I'm not butting in, I hope? Aren't you going to introduce me?"

The speaker paused, secure in the knowledge that he needed no introduction himself. His gaze scanned the group in an expert way; singling out Gini as the only person of any significance, an expression of homage to a beautiful woman came upon his face. He held out his hand.

'Nic Hicks,' he said, unnecessarily, pronouncing his own name with humility and reverent conceit.

Lindsay, who could now hear bombs, mines and howitzers going off, sat down abruptly. Jippy stole out a hand and pressed hers in a comforting way. Lindsay looked around the table as the various introductions and greetings took place. Pascal Lamartine and Rowland McGuire exchanged a curt nod; Rowland selected a seat as far as possible from Gini and as close as possible to Lindsay. Seeing this, Gini frowned and gave Lindsay a searching look. Lindsay could see barbed wire snaking in every direction; she could see vast bomb craters opening up. Through this blasted landscape, Nic Hicks drove the tank of his ego, its gun-turret aimed at Gini, and its tracks flattening everyone else.

'Good news, Col,' he announced, glancing away from Gini for a second. 'I've been on to that maid of Emily's, what's her name? The dragon woman . . .'

'Frobisher. And she isn't a maid. She—'

'Dear heart, I'm joining you for dinner – isn't that splendid? Can't wait. Ah, the champagne. Waiter, well *done* . . . Who wants my autograph? What, that young woman over there? Of course. Tell her I'll be delighted. I'll pop over in a second and have a word. Fans!' He gave the silent group a look of humble resignation. 'Can't escape them, I'm afraid. Terrible *nuisance* – still, grin and bear it, eh? What was I saying, Gini? Oh

yes, your piece on Natasha – *awfully* good. You lady journalists terrify me . . . What? Yes, we start filming any day now . . . No, not the husband, rather a dreary role, the husband, I think . . . I'm playing Gilbert Markham – the lover. *Fascinating* character. Difficult. Tremendous challenge. Rather dark. Sensitive. Immensely *complex*, of course. I wasn't too sure it was *me*, but Tomas twisted my arm . . .'

From across the table, Colin caught Lindsay's eye. He put his hands around his own throat, stuck his tongue out, rolled his eyes and gave a graphic impression of a man dangling from the end of a hangman's noose. Nic Hicks, moving into overdrive, with his name-dropping rate up to three a minute and accelerating, did not notice this. Markov shot Colin a look of sly amusement; Rowland gave a chilly smile, and Lindsay, who wanted to scream or cry, began to laugh instead.

It was Jippy who finally procured Lindsay's release. He had remained silent since Lindsay's arrival, his anxious gaze moving slowly around the group, a sickly greenish pallor settling upon his face. Markov, attuned to his responses, could sense his growing agitation. He saw him look from Rowland to Pascal, and then, fixedly, at a space to the right of Pascal's chair, where nobody stood. Jippy looked at this space for some while, his expression sad; then, as if following the movements of some invisible person, his gaze travelled around the group, coming to rest upon Lindsay. Markov saw his lips move and leaned closer to him, taking his hand.

'What is it, Jippy?' he whispered. 'Try and tell me . . .'

Jippy fixed him with a beseeching gaze. His lips and tongue fought the word, and the word would not be said. It began with a 'p', Markov could hear that much; Jippy struggled.

'P-p-para—' he whispered. Markov squeezed his hand, trying to decode this. Paranormal? Paratrooper?

Parasol? Parasite? Parapet? Paradox? He could think of nothing that made the least sense. He looked at Pascal Lamartine's tense figure; he too had said virtually nothing; his cool grey gaze rested on the figure of Rowland McGuire, seated next to Lindsay. Rowland, who appeared blind and deaf, looked as if he were standing on the edge of some cliff, undecided whether to leap from it or step back. Next to him, Lindsay was making a frantic and nervous attempt to prevent conversation from flagging. She had been discussing the weather for the last five minutes, in the desperate manner of one who, if need be, could discuss its minutiae for the rest of the night. Jippy's hand gave a small jerk.

'Paracetamol,' he said, to Markov, in a low clear voice. Markov gave him a startled look, then, interpreting this as best he could he leaned across to Lindsay.

'Darling,' he said, 'I think I'm going to whisk Jippy away. He has a migraine – and it's getting worse . . .'

Lindsay embraced Jippy, to whom she had never felt more grateful, and sprang to her feet.

'We should go too,' she said hastily, looking at Gini.

'Colin, I'll just fetch my coat . . .'

Gini also rose. 'I'll come with you,' she said.

They left before anyone else could argue or intervene; crossing the crowded room, Lindsay glanced back once. She saw Rowland McGuire rise and then, in a deliberate way, move across and sit down next to Pascal Lamartine. Gini also saw this, and came to a halt in the entrance; Lindsay, agitated and distressed, caught hold of her by the wrist and pulled her into the lobby.

'Let Rowland speak to him,' she said. 'Gini, don't go back. Rowland will explain – he'll tell him he had no idea you were going to be here tonight. Oh, Gini, I'm so sorry. I'm so terribly sorry. I didn't know Rowland was coming – I promise you. I'd never have let this happen . . . Quick, let's go upstairs. My coat's in my room anyway . . .'

Lindsay ran up the stairs to the first floor, Gini following her more slowly. Entering her room, Lindsay saw with relief that the maids had been in during her absence; the tumbled bed was remade, at least. It had been turned down for the night, but two chocolates had been laid out on the two pillows, Colin's shirt was draped across the back of a chair and a pair of Lindsay's stockings was dangling from the back of another. The room still sang of intimacy, and Lindsay began to blush.

Gini followed her into the room, her manner tense. She looked at the ridiculous chocolates, the pillows, the bed. Without saying a word, she moved across to the windows, parted the curtains and looked out.

'It's still snowing,' she said, in a flat voice. She drew in her breath and turned around. Lindsay saw that her hands were unsteady and her eyes unnaturally bright.

'So – Rowland must have told you about Paris then?' she said.

'No, of course not.' Lindsay's colour deepened. 'He would never do that, Gini. I was *there*. It was obvious.'

'Was it?'

'Oh, Gini, you know how it is. One look at his face; one look at yours. Don't let's talk about this. It's none of my business. It was a long time ago . . .'

'I loved Rowland. In a way, I did. I haven't seen him since then – not once.' Gini gave a helpless gesture of the hands. 'And now – Pascal will be so furious. He's never really forgiven me, you see. It was all so *fraught*. Pascal found out – did you realize? He walked in on us in our room at that hotel . . .' She hesitated. 'There was this terrible scene; I thought they were going to fight one another. It was I who had to decide in the end. *I* broke it off, not Rowland. Rowland was devastated. *Devastated*. And now, tonight – he scarcely said one word to me . . .'

'Please, Gini. I don't want to hear this. I – Look, I'm just going to try Tom in Oxford once more. I've been

trying to get him all evening. Then I'll have to go . . . ' She moved past her friend and began dialling. She listened to the number ringing in Oxford – it was one o'clock in the morning in Oxford now. She let it ring and ring, then gently replaced the receiver.

'It was all so complicated. And so *painful*. The worst moment of my whole life . . . ' Gini said, as if there had been no interruption. Tears had come to her eyes; Lindsay looked at her uncertainly, wishing she could have reached Tom, knowing that just the sound of her son's voice would have eased her confusion and distress.

'Oh, what am I going to do now? What am I going to say to Pascal?' Gini covered her face with her hands. 'He can be so jealous, Lindsay . . . '

'Just tell him the truth,' Lindsay said. 'There's a simple explanation, Gini. He'll understand. Look, I'm sorry, but I must go—'

'I still don't know why I let any of it happen,' Gini continued, as Lindsay opened the closet and took out her funereal coat. 'I look back, and I can't understand – I must have made a decision, there must have been a moment when I thought "Yes" . . . But why? It caused so much harm. Was it just because he was there at that particular time? Maybe it was just his appearance . . . ' She paused. 'I hope it wasn't that. But he is so – I'd forgotten how handsome he is . . . '

'It isn't just his looks.' Lindsay turned away. 'You now that as well as I do. Gini, don't pursue this—'

'I think I could have loved him. I said that to him once.' Her face now wet with tears, she sat down on the bed. 'But sometimes I think that wasn't true, that it was just my excuse. I might have been *using* him . . . '

'Gini, I'm sure that's not so. You wouldn't do that.'

'It could be true.' Gini's pale face became set. 'You see, I wanted Pascal to give me a baby, and he was resisting and resisting. That hurt me so much . . . '

She made a small choking sound. Lindsay, distressed,

sat down beside her and put an arm around her shoulders.

'Gini, don't, please don't,' she said. 'You'd been *ill* then. These things can happen. Loving one person doesn't prevent your being attracted to someone else . . .'

'Maybe it was that simple.' Gini gave her a doubting look. 'I wish I could be sure, but Pascal changed his mind after I had the affair with Rowland. He was afraid of losing me then, so he gave way about the baby. Perhaps I just used Rowland to manipulate Pascal . . .'

She gave a small anxious gesture of the hands. 'Oh, I hope that wasn't so. I can't bear to think I did that. Maybe Pascal sees it that way now. He might. Tonight – you know what he said to me tonight? He said I was tenacious, that I always get my own way in the end . . .'

'He said that? Gini, don't cry.' Lindsay took her hand. 'Why did he say that?'

'Because I asked him to stop covering wars.' Gini turned her face away. 'I always promised myself I'd never do that. But I did – after Lucien was born. I was so afraid then. I had these terrible dreams – about snipers, mines, bombs . . . I wanted Pascal to be safe. I wanted to believe he'd be there when Lucien was growing up . . .'

'That's understandable. Any woman would want that,' Lindsay said gently. 'You shouldn't blame yourself for feeling that way. Even if you'd said nothing, Pascal must have known he'd have to make a choice . . .'

'I coerced him—'

'That's ridiculous.'

'That's how *he* sees it. His first wife made the very same demands, and now I'm doing it. I'm turning into a second Helen. I was always afraid that would happen . . .'

Bending her head, she began to cry again. 'Oh, Lindsay – I feel afraid. I was sitting downstairs tonight

and I just felt afraid. I looked at Rowland, and I thought about all the decisions I'd made, and it seemed to me . . . ' She hesitated. 'It seemed as if I couldn't be sure of anything. Not my own motives, not the choices I made. Nothing. I was looking at my own life story, and it seemed so *arbitrary*. Maybe I could have written it differently . . . '

'You regretted Rowland?' Lindsay said quietly.

'Perhaps. In passing.' Gini rose and turned away. 'And I felt guilty for that. I have a son now. I love Pascal. But . . . ' She hesitated, then shrugged. 'Love, love, love. I've always cared about it too much perhaps. My father made sure of that.'

There was a silence. Lindsay looked at her friend with affection, with pity, and with a certain fear.

'Is that wrong?' she began slowly. 'Love matters more than anything, surely?'

'Count the crimes committed in its name,' Gini replied, her manner resigned and her tone hardening.

'You don't mean that,' Lindsay said.

'Probably not. I'm a woman.' Gini's tone became dry. 'All for love – which might be a strength, or a weakness. Tell me . . . ' She hesitated, wiping the last tears from her face, then turned back to Lindsay. 'Tell me, Lindsay. Do you love Rowland? Does he love you? Is that what that scene was about tonight?'

'I don't want to answer that. I don't want to talk about it at all . . . ' Lindsay rose, and began to put on her black coat. 'Please, Gini. Leave it. I'm late and I have to . . . '

'He's not right for you.' Gini made the statement in a flat way; she gave a small sigh. 'Lindsay – I have to say this. I *know* Rowland. I know him through and through, and I wish him well. I wish you well. But whatever's happened between you, you're wrong for each other. You do know that?'

'Do I?' Lindsay turned to face her friend; she felt her

heartbeat quicken, as the room became unnaturally quiet. 'Why do you say that?'

'For a hundred reasons – every one of which you know yourself.' Gini paused, then lowered her gaze. 'Not least, he'd damage you. He'd try to be faithful to you, and then he wouldn't be . . .'

'I see. Thanks. Well, that's clear, at any rate—'

'Lindsay, I don't mean to hurt you . . .'

 Gini's face became troubled. 'But someone has to tell you the truth. Just look at it from the most obvious point of view of all – Rowland should marry. He should have children. He needs a woman who can give him children . . . Not someone your age, Lindsay.' She hesitated again. 'I know that's hard, but you have to consider it – in Rowland's case and in Colin's.'

'I'd rather you didn't discuss Colin, if you don't mind.' Lindsay turned sharply away. 'Gini, please, don't say any more . . .'

'I liked Colin.' Gini frowned. 'He seems sweet-natured, witty, great charm . . . A bit feckless, perhaps—'

'Don't you *dare*.' Lindsay swung around, white-faced. 'Don't you dare to presume you know him. Leave this alone, Gini. What gives you the right to lecture and interfere? I'll make my own decisions—'

'Then think before you make them,' Gini replied, her tone also sharpening. 'Have an affair with Colin, by all means; have an affair with Rowland, if you don't mind getting hurt in his case, but just remember – for any man who wants a family, needs a family, you're too *old*. You can't start having babies again at forty-one. Lindsay, you're nearly forty-two – you might not be *able* to have children now. You already have a son, and I know how much he means to you . . .'

 She broke off, her troubled gaze resting on Lindsay's face. 'Rowland wants children, I know that. Does Colin?'

'I don't know.' Lindsay averted her gaze.

'How old is he? He's never been married? He's never had children?'

'He's my age. And no, no marriage, no children—'

'Ah, Lindsay.' With a sigh and an expression of concern, Gini moved forward and rested her hand on Lindsay's arm. 'Then *think*. Whatever you may feel about Rowland or Colin, you can't be selfish here; you must surely see that?'

The words were quietly said, and firmly, for all their tone of regret. After Gini had finished speaking, Lindsay could still hear them echoing and re-echoing in her head. The words shocked her, though indeed, as Gini said, the sentiments expressed were obvious enough. She felt herself give some small, numbed gesture, as if warding the words off.

'Selfish?' she heard herself say, in a low voice.

'You can hurt someone by loving them,' Gini replied, her eyes becoming sad. She put her arms around Lindsay, and for a while the two women stood together quietly in this embrace.

It was hard to hear such an unpalatable truth from a friend, Lindsay thought, turning towards the door when she was sure that she had composed herself. She walked along the corridor, Gini following more slowly. Reaching the stairs, Lindsay looked down at the lobby, where the rest of their group was now awaiting them. With a dazed disbelief, she saw that Rowland McGuire and Pascal Lamartine were now deep in conversation, as if they had put aside their past enmity. Markov and Jippy were waiting to say goodbye, Jippy's face still white, pained and anxious. The actor, Nic Hicks, was signing autographs, and there at the foot of the stairs, waiting for her, was Colin.

Seeing his face light as he caught sight of her, Lindsay felt a surge of misery and distress. Colin could not hide his feelings for her, and had no wish to do so. Lindsay, looking at the openness of his gaze and the transparency

of his affection, felt ashamed. The last thing she would have wished to do was injure him, yet now she saw injury was inevitable – and for that, she blamed no-one but herself.

Her farewell to Gini took place outside, on the sidewalk, and Lindsay felt, as she kissed her, that it was in some ways a final farewell. She pressed her cold lips against her friend's cold cheek, and she knew it would be a long time before she could forgive her for what she had said. Plain-speaking should not, but did, cause rifts; nor was she entirely sure that Gini's reasons for speaking out were as pure as she claimed. Perhaps her motives were altruistic, but perhaps also jealousy had played a part, she thought, as she watched Gini briefly clasp Rowland's hand, then turn away without a backward look. It made no difference – she saw that with a pained clarity. Whatever had prompted Gini to speak, her arguments concerning Lindsay's age were unanswerable. However much that particular truth hurt – and it hurt very deeply – it was one which could neither be argued away, nor escaped.

XV

How long had this truth lain in wait for her? Lindsay asked herself, approaching the stairs at the Conrad. She looked at the red-carpeted stairs, with their sentinel slaves, holding up torches that gave insufficient light. She followed the flights of stairs with her eyes, as they wound up and up, and doubled back. Gini's arguments had a remorseless logic, and she could not understand how, afflicted with a peculiar blindness, she could not have seen this. Or had she seen it – and merely turned away her face, refusing to confront the issue, as she had in the past refused to confront other issues of equal seriousness in her life?

Am I infertile? I might not be infertile, she thought, looking at the red tide of that staircase. She brushed the last of the snow from her black coat; beside her, a radiator sighed; it murmured of biology and bad timing; of statistics and birth defects. She looked at Colin, at the silent figure of Rowland, at the terrible actor, who was bounding up the stairs, still with an endless, ble, meaningless flow of words on his lips.

Some men were her own age. Any one of them could hope, even expect, to be able to father a child for the next twenty years and beyond; she herself did not share this uncircumscribed fecundity, and it had never occurred to her how much that might matter until now. Redundant yet again, she thought, and although she could smile at that, the pain and rebellion in her heart were acute. She glanced over her shoulder, feeling an instinct to leave, a longing to leave; but the evening, of

importance to others, had to be endured, she knew that. Disguising her feelings with some remark, she crossed to the stairs and began to mount them. At the first landing, she heard a sound that sent a pang of recognition straight to her heart; she stopped.

'What was that?' She swung around, looking along the shadowy galleries. 'I can hear a child crying . . .'

Above her, Nic Hicks continued to mount the stairs; both Colin, who was next to her, and Rowland, who was behind her, came to a halt. They listened.

'I can't hear anything – can you, Rowland?'

'No, nothing.'

'You *can*. Listen – there it is again . . .'

Colin hesitated, then with a glance at Rowland, took her hand in his. 'Darling, I really can't hear anything . . .'

'Neither can I. Lindsay, are you all right? Colin, she looks terribly pale . . .'

'Lindsay? Darling? Darling – look at me. Christ, Rowland, I think she's going to faint.'

Lindsay heard this exchange from a great distance. The words were fuzzy and obscure, receding from her fast. A small serene catastrophe occurred: she watched placidly as the bannisters tilted, the stairs somersaulted, and the dome above her head moved in a slow and beautiful arc, coming to rest beneath her feet.

Someone caught her, as she commenced a slow, obedient, dizzying trajectory; when the world re-assembled itself and recognized its usual rules once more, she found she was sitting on the top-most stair of the first flight, with her head between her knees. From this antipodean viewpoint, she discerned that the man on her left had his arms around her, and the man on her right was holding her hand. The man on the right was somewhat calmer than the man on her left.

'Oh, God, God, *God*,' said the man on the left. 'She's ill. I *thought* she didn't look well at the Plaza.'

'Let her breathe. She's coming round. She'll be fine in a minute. Lindsay, keep your head *down*,' said the man on the right.

'Stop *pushing* her. You'll hurt her—'

'I won't. For God's sake—'

'Go and get her some water. Frobisher will give you some water, and ice. Or a key — I remember now — that's what you do. Something cold down the back of the neck. Or is that for a nose-bleed? Oh, Lindsay, Lindsay . . .'

The man on her right sighed and rose to his feet. Lindsay listened to his footsteps mounting the stairs to the next landing. There was a jingling sound. The man on her left began fumbling with her collar. Something small, cold and metallic was inserted against the back of her neck.

To her surprise, upside-down Lindsay found this object produced a discernible effect. Its small chill cleared her vision; she looked down at the red stairs, and seeing they were no longer playing tricks, slowly raised her head. She found herself looking into a pair of blue eyes, alight with anxiety and concern. As she raised her head, a transformation came upon this face.

'Oh, it's worked. Thank God. I only had a Yale — this stupid little Yale. Lindsay — look at me. Can you hear me? Are you all right?'

Lindsay found she could hear him. It seemed to her astonishing and marvellous, that without a muscle moving, the expression in these eyes could alter with such eloquence. She saw anxiety become relief, relief become joy, and joy modulate to love; the love, which moved her very deeply, struck in her some chord, for she recognized the quality of this emotion at once. It was in this way that she looked at her son; this love, unqualified, poignant, and direct was always powerful — and she could sense its power at this moment. The last residual skewing of her vision ceased: the walls stood upright, at right angles to the floor; the last hissings and

whisperings she had been hearing, which might have come from the radiators, although she thought not, also ceased. She had a sense that something in this interior shielded its eyes from the powers here and scurried off.

'A Yale key?' She gave a low sigh. 'Oh, Colin.'

'I know, but it was all I could find.' He paused. 'It's the key to my apartment in England. I have this sort of apartment in my father's house. The house is terribly large. It's called Shute Court, but everyone just calls it Shute . . .'

There was a silence. 'Shute?' Lindsay said. 'Colin, I don't understand . . .'

'That farmhouse belongs to it as well. It's - well, it's part of the estate, and the estate's enormous. My family has had it for four hundred years. It will all be mine one day. Lindsay, I'm rich.'

There was another silence. Colin had spoken in the tones of one confessing some mortal disease. His blue eyes were fixed steadily on hers and his face had become very pale. Lindsay wanted to weep and to laugh. She took his hand in hers.

'I think now might be the moment to faint again,' she said.

This reply appeared to delight Colin; his face lit. He drew in a deep breath, as if about to dive into icy water from some great height, and clasped both her hands in his.

'I want you to marry me,' he said. 'I want you to overlook everything I've just told you and marry me.' He paused. 'I know I proposed before, and I think I meant it then, but there's always the possibility you didn't believe me, considering a few minor factors . . . I'd never met you; I was blind drunk.'

'I'm not narrow-minded,' Lindsay said, in a reproachful way, her vision beginning to blur. 'Colin—'

'I'm not very good at proposing.' Colin gave an agitated gesture. 'On the telephone. On the stairs. I was

going to do it in two days' time, by moonlight. I thought if I did it by moonlight, you might accept.'

'I'm glad you did it here, on the stairs. I'm so—'

'Lindsay, why are you crying?'

'I'm not really crying. Well, I am a bit. I'm – taken aback. Colin, I'm touched, more than touched, and I'm honoured . . .'

Colin, who could hear the 'but' coming, lifted his hand and quickly laid his fingers against her lips. He looked into her eyes intently. 'Don't give me your answer now. I was incapacitated the first time I asked you, and you're incapacitated now. It's not really fair to propose to someone who's just fainted. No, don't say anything.' His expression became tender; he frowned. 'Now keep still. I'm going to fish that key out.'

The process of retrieving the key was complicated and took some time. Having finally extricated it, Colin held it up and looked at it somewhat sadly.

'This is yours,' he said, in a quiet voice. 'It's all yours. I'm yours. I tried to tell you that in my fax from Montana. Did you notice?'

'Ah, Colin – yes, I did.' A tear fell onto her knee. 'I wasn't sure that was what you meant.'

'If I didn't mean it, I would never say it.' He paused and gave her a sad, steady look. 'I believe I could make you happy, Lindsay. I don't have any illusions about my failings – but I know I could do that. I could make you . . . tomorrow and next year and thirty years from now. And thirty years from now, if you were my wife, I'd know I'd achieved something worthwhile in my life, and I'd be completely content. That doesn't sound very romantic, perhaps, but it's my best qualification. I would never alter, Lindsay, I promise you that.'

'Ah, Colin,' she said, turning her face away to hide her tears. 'People do alter. They alter very swiftly, despite all their best intentions . . .'

'No,' Colin said with great firmness. 'I give you my

place. It was dimly lit; he stepped the candles were tightly closed, then began to light the array of candles one by one. They made the corners of the room more conspicuous in the gleaming polished surfaces of the table. Rowland found he could see some pale and insubstantial reflection which he assumed was his own. In the still of the room he found he felt haunted and uneasy; if he turned he felt he might encounter some other self.

The last of the candles refused to light. Patiently, Rowland struck another match; as it again guttered out, with the candle still unlit, he became aware of the noises for the first time. He tensed, then swung around, sensing someone behind him as close as a shadow; he found he was looking at empty space.

The voices emanated from the floor, he was almost certain of that, but the acoustics here had an odd quality, so the voices shifted their position — now they came from his right, now from his left. He was no sooner certain that they issued up from beneath the parquet, when they seemed to come from the walls, or the corridor beyond instead.

He burned his fingers, dropped the match, and again tensed. The shadows bent upon the walls; the voices, a man's and a woman's, he was almost sure, whispered of past losses and future loneliness. He could hear a sound like water; then, as he lent against the table, head bent, the tenor of the voices changed. A new sound began, mounting above these miserable whisperings and drowning them out.

Rowland, less quick to identify the sound of a child crying than Lindsay, finally recognized it. Something brushed against his hand, and he drew back sharply, his heart full of inexplicable grief. He found he was now listening to silence, to a thick, hushed expectant silence. He found he was no longer certain whether he had identified that last cry correctly. It unnerved him, for he

had been sure, so sure, that he had heard the impossible; the calling to him of a son he did not possess.

'Jonathan, try to eat your dinner,' Natasha Lawrence said. 'Please try, darling. Angelica went to a lot of trouble . . .'

Her son speared a tiny fragment of turkey on his fork, put it in his mouth and chewed. Eventually, he swallowed; he bent his head over his plate.

'Natasha, there's no point in forcing him,' Tomas Court said, in a quiet voice. 'Angelica's out. She's not going to see whether he eats it or not.'

'That's not the point.' His wife gave a small nervous gesture. 'This is our first Thanksgiving here. I planned it all so carefully. I wanted . . .'

'The sweet potatoes are certainly very good,' Court interrupted, in a pacifying voice. 'Are there any more?'

'There's heaps.' His wife rose in an eager way. 'They're in the kitchen, keeping warm. I'll get them . . .'

As soon as she left the room, the eyes of Court and his son intersected. Court laid his finger against his lips, picked up Jonathan's plate and scooped most of its contents onto his own. By the time Natasha returned, both were eating, at a steady pace.

Court, who had no appetite whatsoever, forced himself to eat everything put in front of him. He tried to fix his mind on the scene with Natasha that had to take place after dinner, when his son was safely in bed. All the while, Natasha kept up a steady flow of conversation, to which he responded with a polite murmur whenever appropriate. Both of them, he thought, could sense Jonathan's mute distress; both of them, helpless in the face of it, tried to conceal their knowledge. Court began to wish they were not alone, and that Natasha, accepting that his presence was unavoidable, had not cancelled the invitations to her other guests.

He looked around the dining-room from time to time

with a sense of dazed incomprehension. No invitation to see the apartment had been extended by his wife on either of his visits since his return from Montana; he had, as yet, seen only a few of its many rooms. He had seen a whitish hall and a white on white drawing-room where he and Natasha had quarrelled, the previous night. Now he saw this appalling dining-room, where, as Natasha had informed him, the decorator recommended by Jules McKechnie had been given his head.

The dining-room walls, at this man's behest, had been lacquered a deep and not unsubtle red. The furniture, old, heavy, and acquired from God knew where, was black. Court faced his wife across a blackened expanse of oak; his view of his son was half obscured by the ranks of ecclesiastic candlesticks. At intervals around the room were modish arrangements of plants: a white orchid reared up at him from a side-table; one of Natasha's mother's orchid paintings cried out at him, open-throated, from above the chimney-piece; in the grate burned a recalcitrant, smokey, obstinate fire, which gave, and needed to give, no heat.

The temperature in the apartment was in the high seventies, he would have guessed. The air, dry and scented by candles, smelled of pine needles; it had an acrid quality that caught at his throat. He was breathing with caution and with irritation, and trying to disguise this.

He found the apartment uneasy, a little schizoid and desperate. He pitied Natasha for the desperation he could read here, and he pitied his son, who had to make a home in this vast mausoleum of a place. He thought of the small, ugly frame-house where he himself had grown up, a place he had not loved at the time, and from which a drive-in movie theatre two miles away had provided, in his youth, the only means of escape. Poor and cramped his childhood home might have been, but it seemed to him a thousand times preferable to this. He

world; even now, the air teemed with its spirits; their hands plucked at his sleeve, begging him to give them expression and thus release. He could hear two men's voices now, arguing some issue back and forth; he could hear a woman's footsteps, pattering between them. It was in this spectral way that his movies always first came to him: the next movie but one, he thought. He looked up and returned to the red room. His wife had just risen to her feet.

'It's time for Jonathan to go to bed,' she said. 'I'll just see him up. You go through to the living-room, Tomas. I won't be long. Darling, kiss your father goodnight.'

Court hesitated, wondering whether he should suggest accompanying them. Sensing the suggestion would be refused, he rose and held out his arms to his son. Jonathan held back, his face tense and pale. He glanced towards his mother, then cannoned into his father's arms, clinging to him as he was hoisted aloft.

'Will you be here in the morning, Daddy? Will you be here when I wake up?'

'Darling, no.' Court concealed his reaction. 'I start work again tomorrow. I'll be leaving for work long before you wake up. We'll all be off to England soon, remember. Now - off to bed.' He embraced his son tightly, then passed him across to his mother, and listened to their footsteps retreat. He returned to the white living-room, where another stubborn fire smouldered; he kicked at its greying embers and it flared briefly into life.

He picked up the briefcase he had brought with him, with its faxes and photographs, with the documentation that had been pouring in now for a day and a half, and which had to be shown, and explained, to Natasha that night. Where should they sit when he embarked on this explanation? This question, a trivial one, refused to be dislodged. He looked at the room as if it were a set; he adjusted the lighting; he moved an irritating feminine

match, and this perhaps accounted for his feeling, intense since he first entered this place the previous day, that his perceptions were skewed. It was not his perceptions that were to blame, he told himself, what was wrong here was the *space*.

On Hillyard White's drawings, this corridor had run through the centre of the apartment like an artery; now he could see that the corridor, although arterial, was neither centred, nor straight. It angled around a corner that should not have been there; to his immediate right was a wall where there should have been a room – could that room have been bricked up?

He looked at the wall in question, and at the odd sweaty sheen achieved by some specialist paint effect; hung upon it was a picture by Natasha's mother he had always greatly disliked, in which a man's hand grasped the stem of some white and repugnant flower. The picture was askew; irritably, he moved to straighten it, then drew back, with a low exclamation and a sense of dread. A sound was coming from behind the wall, a dry, persistent scratching sound, as if something were clawing at the plaster, desperate to get through, desperate to get out. Court, who had grown up in a farming community, recognized the sound instantly as that of rats.

As a boy, he had shot rats for his uncle in one of his barns; he was paid a nickel a dozen, and the task was one he disliked. It was not easy to shoot the rats, for they were fast and agile; their death throes, prolonged, acrobatic and squirming, were vile yet fascinating to watch. It was difficult too, to collect up the bodies: he had a superstitious fear that one rat might be shamming, that it would rise up and bite him as he stooped. Also, he discovered, the live rats retrieved the dead bodies of their fellows, and did so in a bold, knowing way, even as he approached. He had never been able to decide, nor could his uncle inform him, why they did this: did they give their rat brothers honourable burials – or

did they eat them? He stared at the wall, sweat breaking out on his brow, and all the fears of his childhood rising up; the scratching continued for some while; then, abruptly, it stopped.

'Would you like me to read to you, Jonathan, or shall I tell you a story?' Maria said, as Natasha's footsteps retreated into the distance. A door closed. Maria, plump, bespectacled and familiar, switched on the night-light. Jonathan found her comforting – not as comforting as his parents or Angelica, but comforting nonetheless.

Maria's speciality was fairy stories, of which she had a vast repertoire. In the past, she had told him the story of Hansel and Gretel, and the Babes in the Wood; of Red Riding Hood, of Rapunzel, Cinderella, and a Sleeping Beauty cursed in her cradle by a wicked godmother who was also, Maria said, a witch.

Maria's witch performances were convincing, and Jonathan had enjoyed them at the Carlyle, in company with Angelica. He felt less sure he would enjoy them here. He was discovering that the Conrad was never quiet; there was always some alarming sound, some creaking or inexplicable slithering, just as he was about to fall asleep.

'We could look at my new animal book,' he said, a little uncertainly. 'Daddy gave it to me for Thanksgiving.' He paused. 'Daddy's downstairs now, with Mommy. He may come here to live with us, I think.'

'Well now, wouldn't that be cosy,' Maria said.

She plumped up his pillows, smoothed back his hair, picked up the book and made herself comfortable on the duvet next to him. 'My oh my,' she said, flicking the pages with great rapidity, 'will you look at that.'

Jonathan looked at her curiously. Maria did not seem very interested in the pictures, although she had removed her glasses – the better to see them, she said. Jonathan had never seen her without thick and

unflattering lenses and now he did, he found her eyes odd. They were set too close together and they had a yellowish glint. He thought Maria's eyes had always been brown – dark brown; he said this.

'Brown, blue, green . . .' Maria shut the book. 'Contact lenses. All the colours of the rainbow. You can buy eyes in a store, these days. Any colour you like. Didn't you know that?'

'I guess so . . .'

'Fat, thin, dark, fair, pale, tanned . . .' Maria laughed. 'These days it's easy. A woman can be anyone she wants. Magic, Mr Sharp Eyes.' She gave Jonathan's arm a sharp pinch.

Jonathan did not like the way she said that, and the pinch hurt. He gave her a doubtful look. It would not have surprised him if Maria were capable of magic; he thought of her turning up at the Carlyle to give his mother her pre-theatre massage, with all her little bottles of special oils. These oils were magic, she had told him once, and when he had told his mother, she had smiled. 'Well, magic in a way, maybe,' she had said. 'They smell nice, and they make me relax.'

He sniffed. Maria smelled faintly of her own oils now, he thought, and he could recognize some of them, all the herby scents, lavender and rosemary; beneath them, though, and not quite masked by them, was another, less pleasant odour, that might have been blood or sweat. Maria smelt nervy, twitchy; he laid his hand on her dark sleeve.

'Are your special oils magic, Maria? Do you make them up yourself?'

'I surely do. Mix, mix, mix.'

'What do you put in them?'

'Eye of newt and toe of frog. Slugs and snails and puppy-dogs' tails – that's what little boys are made of. Sugar and spice and all things nice . . .' She made a coughing sound. 'I had a little boy once. You know what

happened to him? He was growing away in my tummy – you know babies do that?’

She turned a yellowish eye towards him; Jonathan gave her a scornful look. ‘Of course I know that. It’s in all my books. Human babies stay there for nine months. With small animals, it’s much shorter, and with big ones, like elephants, it’s . . .’

‘Well my little boy didn’t stay there nine months, Mr Smart-Ass.’ She pinched him again. ‘My little boy was in there *three* months.’ She prodded her stomach. ‘He just had time to grow all his fingers and toes and his ears and eyes – and then you know what? Some doctor came along and sucked him out, scraped him out, hoovered him out. Then they put him in a bucket, because he was just so much *mush*. Red mush. And I wanted to hold him, but they said I couldn’t do that . . .’

Jonathan had frozen still as a mouse. Something was badly wrong with Maria tonight; it was not just the horrible things she was saying, it was the way in which she said them. She kept opening and closing her mouth like a fish, and gasping for breath; her mouth was an ugly, jagged shape. She had now started to cry, but she did not cry as his mother did, quietly, making no sound, the tears coursing down her cheeks; Maria cried noisily, with her face all twisted up. Jonathan did not really want to touch her, but he knelt up in bed and put his arm around her shoulders.

‘Maria, don’t cry. Please don’t cry.’ He put his hands over his ears, and tried not to think about red mush and a bucket.

‘Maria, shall I get Mommy?’

‘No, don’t do that.’ She stopped crying as suddenly as she had started; she smiled instead. ‘I’m OK. It’s just I miss him sometimes, my little boy. He’d be five years old today. You could have played with him, like a little brother – you’d have liked that. Now lie down. I’m going to tuck you up.’

Jonathan wanted to argue, but found he was too afraid. He climbed back beneath the covers and lay very straight.

'Now you go to sleep, you hear me?' She leaned over him very close, so her yellowish eyes had a squinty look, and he could smell something sour and pepperminty on her breath.

'I will, I will,' Jonathan said. He tried not to think about peeing, because he found he wanted to pee, urgently and badly, but he was afraid to tell Maria this. He made a small wriggling movement, then lay still. Maria took his hand in hers; one by one, so it hurt a little, but not too much, she started bending his fingers back.

'And I want you to stay nice and quiet. No calling out when I'm watching TV. I'm going to watch TV now, and I don't want my programme interrupted. You know what I'll do if you start playing me up?'

Jonathan shook his head.

'I'll open that closet door in the hall. And I'll let the bogeyman out. His name's Joseph, and I'll send him in to deal with you. You won't like that. You know what he does to naughty boys, little know-alls like you?' She gave him a long, still, yellowish look. Leaning over, she yanked the bed-covers off. 'He eats them up. He eats their fingers and their toes and their ears, all the bits that stick out - they're his favourite bits. Then he bites off their little wee-wees, so there's a big hole, and he sucks and sucks, and all their insides come out, all their heart and lungs and liver and lights, and he swallows them up like soup. Slurp slurp.' She laughed. 'Sleep tight, precious,' she added, and switched out the light.

Jonathan lay there in the dark, too afraid to move. He wanted to pee very badly now. He told himself there was no such thing as the bogeyman, and there was nothing in the hall closet except sheets. Then he found he could hear footsteps dragging along the corridor; he

could hear the TV and he could hear footsteps . . . He peered into the dark, clutching at his bear, and the dark moved like eyes. He made a small whimpering sound, and the warm urine came gushing out in a flood. It felt comforting at first, but then it began to feel cold; he listened and listened, but the footsteps seemed to have stopped.

He wondered if Maria was really watching TV, the way she said. If she was, she would have her back to the door and her back to the corridor. He thought if he was very very quiet, and avoided the floorboards that squeaked, he could creep past her and she would never know. Then he could run downstairs to Mommy and Daddy, and they'd be angry with Maria and she'd never come back.

Very slowly, he inched the bedcovers aside. Claspings his bear, he crept to the door and looked out. He could hear the TV again, but the door to that room was closed. He inched past it, pressing himself against the wall. His pyjama bottoms were wet and clingy, and he felt cold and shivery; he inched a little bit more and a little bit more: past the sitting-room, past the bathrooms; he could see the light was on in his mother's bedroom, and the light was spilling out through the open door into the corridor ahead.

He crept towards the patch of light and then stopped, too afraid to go on and too afraid to go back. Maria was in his mother's room, where she had no right to be. He could hear her muttering and talking to herself; she was doing something to his mother's bed; he could hear some horrible ripping, grunting sounds. He could just see Maria's upraised arm and something bright and sharp in her hand, then she bent and grunted and disappeared round the edge of the door.

Sweat ran down into his eyes; he opened his mouth to cry out, but he only made a little sound, some dry squeaking sort of sound. Maria was panting now and

groaning, and that made him more afraid. He had heard noises like that before, a long time before, coming from his mother's room, and when he had gone to help her, there were his parents, naked in bed. His mother's head was tilted back over its edge, her hair rippling down like water, and his father was on top of her, gripping her wrists, moving to her cries, rising and falling, rising and falling, his face sharp and gleaming, rhythmic as an axe.

'Daddy?' he said in a low voice. 'Daddy are you there?' The door instantly swung back. His father was not there, and when he saw what Maria had done to his mother's room, he started to cry. He slid down the wall in a little pool of misery and fear, not daring to look up.

'Just in time, just in time,' said Maria, crouching down beside him. She jerked his head up. 'Now we can really have some fun, precious,' and she showed him the knife.

'Are you worrying about the time for some reason, Natasha?' Tomas Court said, catching his wife in the act of easing back her sleeve and checking her watch.

'No, no,' Natasha replied, 'I'm listening, Tomas. It's just - I thought I heard something. I was wondering if Angelica had come back early . . .'

That possibility did not please her husband. His face tight with annoyance, he crossed the room and went out into the corridor. His wife folded her hands on her lap. It was ten-thirty; Angelica was not due back for another hour and a half. She looked at the briefcase on the table, and the mass of papers inside it which her husband had been about to take out. She knew the subject of Joseph King could be put off no longer, and the effect, as she had predicted to Juliet McKechnie, was to heighten her nervousness.

The slightest sound now made her tense. For the past thirty minutes, in a hopeless way, she had been trying to think of some pretext to leave the room, go upstairs, and check that Jonathan was safe. She knew this was

unnecessary; Maria knew about his nightmares; if any problems arose which she could not cope with, Maria would summon her. All the same, she longed to be in the same room as her son, to see with her own eyes that he was at peace and soundly asleep.

It angered her that she could not bring herself to leave the room and risk her husband's certain irritation if she did. She knew she was still subject to the tyranny of her husband's moods, but she also knew that if she risked angering him, he would stay even longer. He might pick a fight with her again, as he had done the previous night, and if angry, or desperate, he might then attempt to make love to her. He had been very close to doing so yesterday, but Angelica's presence in the apartment had, finally, inhibited him. The knowledge that her guardian was not there to protect her tonight, made Natasha excited and fearful. If Tomas began to touch her, or to kiss her, she might begin to want him again. What would the consequences then be? Then she would be admitting Tomas, and all the chaos he brought with him, back into her life.

'This precious apartment building of yours is infested with rats, d'you know that?' he said, returning to the room and picking up the briefcase. 'If you stand in the hall, you can hear them scratching around. What's behind that wall? Heating ducts? You should talk to the super—'

'I don't think it's rats, Tomas,' she said, in a quiet voice. 'There's some service area for the elevator behind there. It opens through into the elevator shaft. It's just machinery noises, cables, draughts . . . I'll mention it to Giancarlo though, just in case.'

'Fine. Then let's continue. You need to hear this.' In a weary way, he drew out a sheaf of papers. 'Most of this came through yesterday and today from the investigation agency. If I'd waited for the police to make those checks it would have been six months before we

got the results. As it is, once the agency had something solid to go on, they made progress.' He paused, looking at her as she sat huddled at one end of the white sofa. 'I once knew Joseph King, Natasha, and so did you. Do you want to see a picture of how King looked then, when we first met?'

He tossed a photograph towards her. In silence, Natasha examined it. The picture, in black and white, showed a group of people eating lunch around a table; the setting appeared to be a movie location. She examined the picture, recognizing no-one in it.

'The third from the left. Fair hair.'

Natasha swallowed nervously. 'But that's a woman, Tomas,' she said.

'A woman. Precisely.' He crossed to the sofa and sat down next to her. Natasha, looking at his white set face, realized that he was exhausted; she could hear now that his breathing was stressed. Quietly, she held out her hand to him and he took it in his own.

'Her name then was Tina Costello,' he continued. 'She's had a great many names since. That's some of the crew on *The Soloist*. She worked in Make-up. Assistant to an assistant to an assistant. So when I say you knew her, I'm exaggerating. You'd have passed her, maybe said, "Good morning" – no more than that. She was aged twenty then, and studying at UCLA on some movie course. I hired her as a favour to the third assistant director, who said she was his cousin. I spoke to him today, at length. It turns out she wasn't his cousin. He denies it, but he was screwing her, I expect.' He paused, looking away. 'I fired her – or someone fired her on my behalf, six weeks in. There'd been complaints from the Make-up department: time-keeping problems, general incompetence. I've never given her a second thought until she turned up yesterday at the door of my loft in TriBeCa.'

His wife bent her head over the photograph. From

nothing here for a week. Just that flurry of calls when the decorators were here . . . Nothing since. You saw her *yesterday*. You *met* her? Did you talk to her for long? Did you recognize her?

'No, of course not. She looks totally different now. I wouldn't have remembered her, in any case.'

'And yesterday she told you that she'd worked for you in the past?' Panic had come into his wife's eyes and her hands had begun to tremble. 'Tomas - I don't understand. No woman would do this. All those years; all the *work* she put into it. She'd have to be so obsessed to do that. Did she have a grudge against you because you fired her? Is that it?'

'Who knows?' He looked away. 'She's obsessed with my work. She isn't sane. Her motives don't interest me, I just want her and her brother found. I want them locked up, and I want them out of my life. That's it.'

'I can't bear this.' With a sudden despairing gesture, his wife rose and turned to face him. 'You're lying, Tomas. Why do you do that? I know you so well. I can tell when you're lying - something happens to your eyes and your voice . . .'

'Natasha, don't pursue this. Let it be. It's irrelevant now.'

'Irrelevant? I don't think so. You'd better tell me, Tomas. Which of them was it? The girl, or her brother? It could have been either, we both know that.'

'The girl.'

'You slept with her? When we were making that movie? Then? But Jonathan was only a baby then. I thought—'

'Then. At my apartment yesterday also. And sleeping wasn't involved. Natasha . . .'

'Ah, dear God, I'm still jealous.' She turned away, covering her face. 'I still can't bear it, even now. In your apartment? Some woman who'd turned up out of nowhere? Some woman you didn't even *know*?'

She snatched at the pile of papers he had indicated, tossing aside sheets of print. Coming upon the right picture at last, he saw her face change. She gave a sharp intake of breath.

'Is this a joke?' She stared at him. 'There must be some mistake . . .'

'No. No mistake.'

'But I know this woman. Tomas – you met her one day at the Carlyle with Angelica.'

'I never met her. What are you talking about?'

'Glasses. She wears glasses usually. Maria. The one who used to give me a massage before I went to the theatre – once a week, twice a week sometimes—'

Under her left breast, Court heard; he stared at his wife.

'Oh, dear merciful God. She's upstairs,' she said in a low voice. 'She's upstairs, with Jonathan, tonight.' He saw her face become blank with fear, then she turned and ran from the room. Court followed. Halfway along that narrow artery of a corridor, pain tightened in his chest. He slumped back against the wall, fumbling for his inhaler. When the pain eased, he began opening doors, calling his wife's name. He found himself in a kitchen, where a machine threshed. He found himself in a laundry room, where a tap dripped in a white sink. He opened another door and brooms fell out at him. Then he saw the right door, the only possible door – a jib-door, small, wallpapered, disguised and well-nigh invisible.

He forced it back and began to mount the stairs. His wife began screaming before he was halfway up.

'They locked her up,' Frobisher said, coming towards the end of a ghost story familiar to everyone present except Rowland McGuire and Nic Hicks. She produced some mince pies, dusted with sugar and fragrant with spice, placing them in the centre of the table.

'That's why she still *walks*!' Emily put in. 'Confinement! She couldn't be confined then – and she *still* can't.' She shivered. 'That woman had a lust for blood.'

'Em, please. *I* am telling this story. We will tell it *my* way, if you please. Now, shall I continue?'

Everyone at the table except Lindsay gave some form of assent.

'As I was saying . . . The Conrad brothers locked their sister up – for her own safety, or so they told the staff. The room they kept her in is just under this one.' She glanced down. 'That apartment is a duplex – the only one in this building. The room was tucked away up some stairs, so no-one could hear her if she cried out. The Conrad brothers told everyone that Anne had left for Europe on a visit, and all of their friends accepted that . . .' She paused. 'Although there was gossip, wasn't there, Emily?'

'Indeed yes. Tongues wagged. The Conrad brothers were rich – and strange. So there had *always* been talk.'

'Be that as it may,' Frobisher continued, lowering her voice, 'their precautions were to no avail. Every night, one of the brothers would stay with her; they took it in turns to do that. And one night, one of the brothers got careless . . .'

'*I* heard,' said one of the ancient women whose identities Rowland confused. '*I* heard that the brothers quarrelled and one of them let her out . . .'

'Possible. In the circumstances, even probable.' Emily glanced around the table. 'They were all so very *close* . . .'

'Either way,' Frobisher continued, doggedly, 'a fatal error was made. Her door was left unlocked. She ran down to that great drawing-room, in a white muslin dress . . .'

'*Blue*, Froby. I always heard it was blue.'

'*White*, Em. A white dress – in fact, a kind of nightgown – and her black hair all loose. She was a very

beautiful young woman, no dispute about *that*. It was a summer's morning. The shades were down against the heat, but the windows were wide open. There was some kind of struggle – the brothers tried to subdue her, or so they later said. She broke free of them, gave one last terrible cry, and she jumped. Or . . .’ Frobisher paused, giving the assembled company a dark glance. ‘Or, she was *pushed*. That possibility was whispered at the time . . . But pushed by whom? The elder Conrad twin? The younger? By both? History does not relate, alas. And naturally, the whole matter was hushed up afterwards. Though people did say—’

‘She was with child?’ Another of the ancient women asked, on a gentle, interrogative note.

‘Six months gone,’ Emily said, in a brisk way. ‘Six months gone, my dears. And her skull cracked open on the sidewalk right outside the entrance. Cracked open like an egg.’

Lindsay made a small sound. ‘Poor, poor child,’ said the third of the old women, glancing towards her. ‘Such a terrible thing. Tell me, Emily – was she truly mad, do you think?’

‘North north-west,’ quoted Emily in a sage way. ‘When the wind was southerly . . . And at what point did she *become* mad, if she did? One cannot be sure, since it was the brothers who took charge of the story afterwards. As is generally the way, of course.’

A silence fell in the room; a candle guttered; Lindsay felt Colin’s hand reach for her own under the table. Rowland stared fixedly at his plate. Nic Hicks, having been silenced by Frobisher’s story for the first time that evening, passed the mince pies, then took one himself.

‘A rat, a rat . . .’ he said, taking his cue from Emily’s quotation, and acknowledging this with a charming glance. ‘So, who was the secret lover? One of the brothers? Does history relate that?’

'No, it does *not*,' Emily replied in a huffy tone.

Nic Hicks never noticed when his knuckles were rapped; he pursued his point. 'But what *happened* to the incestuous brothers? I'll bet they came to unpleasant ends . . .'

'You are correct.'

'Fascinating.' Hicks sighed. 'You know, Emily, it reminds me of the first production of *Hamlet* I acted in. At Stratford – a million years ago now, of course. My salad days. I was straight out of drama school, playing Osric . . .'

'Excellent casting,' said Colin, under his breath.

'Sir Peter directing, wonderful Hal in the title role, Gwen as Ophelia. She played her pregnant! Visibly so by the mad scene, and when she was brought in on the bier – well! Unmistakably *enceinte*. This very, very round belly – a *huge* gasp from the stalls. *Ruined* the graveyard scene – such a scandal! A *cause célèbre*, overnight! Letters to *The Times*, professors up in arms, the hairy feminists jubilant, needless to say . . . Of course, we were *packed* out every night . . . Six years later, when I was playing Hamlet myself, with Gwen as my Gertrude – *terribly* good, I thought – I said, "Let's get our priorities *straight*. Concentrate on the prince. Honour the indecision!" I'll never forget, on the first night, Trev said . . .'

'Let me out,' said Colin in a low voice only Lindsay could hear. 'Please God, let me out *now*. I can't stand any more of this.'

As he spoke, he suddenly remembered an intention disclosed in one of his Montana faxes. Unspeakable things! Gently, he released Lindsay's hand. Turning to Nic Hicks with an expression of profound interest, he slipped his freed hand beneath the folds of Lindsay's red skirt. He began to move it gently upwards. He could feel the top of her stocking, then the skin of her inner thigh, which was astonishingly smooth and soft. He

sighed. Lindsay, who had spent the dinner shuttling between dismay and despair, became aware of the intent, thoughtful gaze of Rowland, seated immediately opposite her. She gave the straying hand a caress, then a small and desperate pinch.

'I gave my daughter a Shakespearian name,' said the quiet and melancholy voice of Henry Foxe, seated to her immediate left. 'Marina. I called her Marina. Such a lovely name, I always thought.'

'A beautiful name,' Lindsay said gently, feeling pity wash into her heart. Henry Foxe had shown her a picture of his daughter before they came in to dinner. His daughter, dead a decade, was tonight much in his thoughts, he had said.

'It's a pun on mariner,' Rowland said, making Lindsay jump. 'In the play, that is.'

'Is that so? I didn't know that.' Henry Foxe gave a small sigh. 'Well, that would make sense. It's from *Pericles*, my dear.' He turned back to Lindsay. 'Very rarely performed. I'd never seen the play, never read it. I did read it finally, when she was a little girl . . .' He gave a small dry sigh. 'Of course, as Mr McGuire will know, in the play, there is a happy ending. The daughter is not dead, as her father has believed. She has been rescued from the sea by pirates. So she returns from the dead.'

He paused. 'It is a very moving scene, when the father and daughter are reunited, when they recognize one another at last. Such a strange play – a corrupt text, I believe. Am I right, Mr McGuire?'

'You are. Yes.'

'There are lapses elsewhere in the play – but that scene, I always feel, is most beautiful. The daughter sings to her father, you know, and of course, he begins to recognize her because she so resembles his dead wife . . .'

'Their identities elide,' Rowland said, his eyes resting

upon Lindsay. 'As is the case in many of the late plays, of course.'

'Such a beautiful scene.' Henry Foxe repeated, shaking his head. 'Such language! One is robbed, in the modern world, of such language. That scene was my mother's favourite in the entire canon. An unconventional choice. Perhaps that's why I chose the name for my daughter. How odd. I'd never thought of that possibility until tonight.'

He gave another little dry sigh. Lindsay, pitying him, found she could think of no adequate reply. She felt her eyes swim with tears. She laid her hand quietly on his arm, and Henry Foxe, not looking at her, patted it. Lindsay rose, and with a few whispered words to Colin, left the table, finding she could no longer bear to be in this room with its eddying undercurrents, its ghosts and its griefs.

'Hi, it's Tom,' said her son's familiar voice. 'Katya and I can't take your call right now. But leave a message after the tone, and we'll call back.'

Lindsay, sitting on the bed in one of Emily's guest-rooms, stared at the wallpaper. It was yellowish, old, and formal in its patternings. Some device marched away towards the corners, another marched upwards to the cornice. She had received no reply from Tom's room when she called from the Plaza at eight; she had received the answerphone, less than an hour later, when she had called from this room before they went into dinner. This fact had refused to lie still in her mind ever since; all through Frobisher's meal, she had felt an irrational and mounting anxiety - and the turn the conversation had taken had made that anxiety worse.

'Tom, it's me,' she said, into the phone, trying to deaden the panic in her voice. 'I left a message earlier. Darling, are you all right? I'm - I've been worrying

about your flight. Tom, if you're there, will you pick up? I know it's late but . . .'

The machine cut her off. Lindsay replaced the receiver. To hear her son's voice, yet be unable to speak to him, made the panic much worse. She rose and began to pace about, then sat down on the bed again, trying to calm herself.

Frobisher had piled everyone's coats on the bed as they arrived. Lindsay could see her own new illicit black coat, a scarlet scarf that belonged to Nic Hicks, some terrible bristling bear of a thing that belonged to Emily, a moleskin cape affair that one of the three ancient friends had been wearing, and lying side by side, virtually identical, the two dark overcoats belonging to Colin and to Rowland. Lindsay looked at these coats and heard herself make a strange sound, half gasp and half sob.

Oh, what am I going to *do*? What am I going to *do*? she thought, rising again, and again pacing about. She looked at her watch, and found it was almost half-past ten. She tried to work out what time that meant it must be in Oxford, but her mind refused to do the sum. It kept washing back and forth in a mad futile way, seeing and problems at every turn. Oh why did Colin be on the *stairs*? she thought, then, telling herself the location was unimportant, her mind went rushing off in another direction. No matter what she did now, thanks to her past actions, others were going to be hurt. Was there some way of preventing that? She could see no such way, no route out. There would be some damage to Rowland, she was not sure how much, and there would be considerable damage to Colin. I must *extricate* myself, she thought. I must take action and I must *plan*. But she found she could not plan, because she had looked at the telephone: her anxiety for Tom had come surging back, and all she could think of now was the necessity, the *urgency* of hearing his voice.

There she was, as she had always been — a poor helmsman, charting a desperate, erratic course across an interminable ocean, always believing that land would be sighted soon. At sea: the story of my life, she thought.

A sound came from the doorway behind. 'I'm sorry. I didn't realize you were in here,' said Rowland McGuire's voice.

Lindsay dropped the coat guiltily and stepped back.

'I didn't mean to interrupt. I just came for my coat, Lindsay. I have to leave now, and—'

'You're not interrupting. I was just trying to call Tom. I've been worrying about Tom for some stupid reason . . .'

'You weren't calling Tom then.'

'No. I was — thinking.'

This remark met with a silence — a silence which clamoured to Lindsay. Rowland picked up his overcoat and slowly put it on. Lindsay, afraid to look at him, could feel the tension radiating from him. She hoped he would remain silent; she hoped he would speak.

'I went to Oxford to see Tom yesterday,' he said, finally, turning to look at her. He hesitated. 'He'd left for Scotland, so I missed him. I — Lindsay, I went there because I had this fixed idea in my head that I had to ask Tom's blessing before I spoke to you.' He gave a sigh, looking away. 'Now, I don't even know why I felt . . . at. I went as soon as I received your letter. Your letter was delayed, you see. At the time, it seemed important to do that. Now it seems obtuse.'

'Rowland, no — ' Lindsay took a step towards him. 'You mustn't think that. *Not* obtuse . . .'

'I really couldn't have borne it in that dining-room for another second,' he went on, in a quiet voice. He glanced towards the door, then rested his green eyes sadly upon her face.

'I couldn't hear what anyone was saying. I was trying

to understand how much all of this was simply a matter of chance, accident – mistimings, especially on my part. I kept trying to convince myself that if I stayed, the timing might suddenly come right. Then – something someone was saying – I realized: better absent myself. I shouldn't have been here. I shouldn't have come to New York. My presence has already caused enough trouble for one evening, and I don't want it to cause any more, especially for you . . .'

He hesitated, then moved into the doorway. Lindsay watched the light from the corridor glance across his face. She could see the strength of emotion he was struggling to conceal, and her heart went out to him. A great surge of words rose up within her; she said his name and began to move quickly towards him. Reaching his side, she realized that none of those words could be said.

'I wanted to know—' He broke off, taking her hand. 'Did you understand my letter, Lindsay?'

'I didn't then, but I do now. Rowland, I'm so sorry. I'm so desperately sorry—'

'My love.' He caught her against him, cradling her head in his hands. He began to kiss her hair, then pressed her tight against his chest. Lindsay listened to the beating of his heart. Everything she had never said to him, and everything she had ever hoped he might say to her, were expressed then. She felt in the confusion and flurry of that brief embrace.

Gripping her by the arms, he drew back and looked down at her face.

'Yes or no, Lindsay – just tell me that.'

The question had been torn from him. Lindsay could see that he had not intended to ask it and ~~perhaps~~ regretted it the instant the words were said. ~~Lindsay~~ and fear of disloyalty could be read in his face. To the question there was a rich fund of ~~answers~~ she could draw from them stored in her heart. Three years of ~~answers~~ and

explanations and revelations never made; she consigned them to oblivion.

'No,' she replied, in a low voice – and she admired him then as much as she had ever done, for although the recovery was not instant, it was courageous and it was swift.

'Ah, I feared you would say that.' He stopped, fought to control his voice, then continued. 'Lindsay you will always be very dear to me, and I wish you nothing but joy. I want you to know that—'

He embraced her gently as he said this, drawing her into his arms in a quiet protective way. Lindsay found she could not see for sudden tears. She found that, as once before in Oxford, she was encircled by his arms, and her face was resting against his chest.

'If you were wearing that green sweater,' she said, in a shaky voice, 'I'd kiss it now, Rowland . . .'

'Never mind. You can kiss my tie instead.'

Lindsay kissed his tie. She was just thinking how much she liked the patterns of this tie, how sensible and orderly they were, and how calm she felt, when someone began screaming. It was a woman, and the sound was painfully close. The cry was repeated, then repeated again, on a mounting note of terror and distress.

Colin was halfway along the corridor when he too heard this cry. The corridor in Emily's apartment, as in that of Natasha Lawrence's below, ran like an artery from the reception rooms at the front of the building to the bedrooms at the back.

In the dining-room, halfway along this corridor, there had, for some while before, been sounds that indicated disturbance, trouble and distress.

For a while, still seated at the table, Colin had been deaf to them. To his right, some interminable conversation between Emily and her three ancient female friends had begun; it concerned the current vagaries of

the elevator. Colin had been deaf to that too; the whole of his mind dwelt upon Lindsay – to such an extent that he scarcely noticed Rowland rise and speak to Emily in a quiet voice. It was only when Rowland came around the table to him that he had realized he was leaving; he half rose, but Rowland immediately pushed him back towards his seat.

‘No, really, Colin. I’d rather see myself out. I don’t want to break things up, and I have to go—’

‘Don’t be absurd. Let me see you out . . .’

‘Really.’ Rowland’s expression did not encourage argument. ‘I’d rather slip away. I have an early plane to catch. My thanks for this evening—’

He turned and left. Slowly, Colin sat down again, puzzled by Rowland’s expression, tone and haste.

‘The override switch, Emily dear,’ one of the ancient women was saying, and Colin, scarcely hearing her, began to feel a sick unease. Something was happening, he felt; something *had* been happening, and he had been blind and deaf to it. But what was it? What was it?

He could sense some dark and shapeless idea at the back of his mind, and he knew he had been given clues, that he could see this thing if he concentrated, if he dragged it forward into the light. But the thing would not move, and was almost instantly occluded by another, more pressing thought. Colin began to realize that Lindsay’s telephone call was taking too long, that she had been absent too long. Could she have felt faint again? And why had Rowland chosen that moment to leave? It was then that the sounds from below, apparent for some while, finally registered. He heard the running footsteps, the slamming doors, the woman’s voice calling, at exactly the same moment that anxiety for Lindsay gripped.

‘Is something *wrong*, Emily?’ One of the ancient women suddenly asked. ‘My hearing is not perfect, but . . .’

'I can hear someone crying,' said Henry Foxe, becoming very pale and rising to his feet. 'Emily, it sounds like a child crying . . .'

'What's that *banging*?' Frobisher rose with a look of alarm. 'It's coming from the stairs. Is some door being forced? Colin, I think you should—'

Colin was already running from the room as she spoke. As he reached the main corridor, he heard the scream, rising up from below his feet. He froze, feeling the cry reverberate up through his body. His heart had started hammering; he glanced along the corridor, to his right and to his left. To his right, he saw nothing; to his left, he half saw in a bedroom doorway some shape which should not be there, which could not be there, and which he knew he had to be imagining. From beyond the front door, straight ahead of him, a renewed, confused clamour broke out. He could hear a frantic, metallic, banging sound, some broken protest, the cries of a child in obvious distress, then the sound of a man's voice – a voice he recognized at once. No, dear God, please no, said this voice, and Colin found he was across the hall, through the door, and out in the shadows of the landing.

It was of the utmost urgency and importance to be there, he knew that, even as he also knew that it was of the utmost urgency and importance to remain in Emily's apartment, where he could look again at the two people – yes, it had been two people – who had been standing together in that doorway to his left.

He peered along the galleried landing, trying to see past its riot of pillars, trying to make sense of its shapes. Ahead of him, that red carpet poured itself down the stairs; above him, other galleries whispered and cried out alarm. He could hear doors opening and closing; he could sense a terrible, gathering collective fear: something had been let loose in this building – but Colin's mind refused to tell him what it was. He heard Emily's

voice from the corridor behind him, then some cry from one of the old women. He fixed his eyes on the landing, and found he could see some haunting white shape, moving beyond the pillars: the shape was the size of a child; it was airborne: it had too many arms, and there was something that appalled him about its face.

'Lindsay, stay *there*. Colin, what's happening?' Rowland said, from behind him, and that banging and crashing and anarchy burst out again. Of course he was not surprised to hear Rowland's voice, Colin thought; of course he already knew that Rowland had not left; of course he also knew why Rowland had remained. He had seen him with his arms around Lindsay. He had been shown the unthinkable, the unimaginable and the impossible just now, in that bedroom doorway to his left.

How stupid of me, he thought. How unbelievably stupid. How could I not have seen something so obvious? A dull pain settled itself inside him; looking along the galleries now, he found the pain steadied his vision and comprehension had come. He saw a simple tableau – father, abductor, child – which made clear and immediate sense.

'Oh, my heart – let me sit down. I can't breathe,' said a voice from the hall behind him. Glancing back, he saw Emily being helped to a chair, Rowland bending over her with a look of concern, and Lindsay running towards him.

It seemed to take her an immense time to approach. Years passed while he looked at her pale uplifted face. He knew she was saying something, but her words would not transmit their sense. He said something to her – he was never sure afterwards what it was, but it was probably something about the police, about calling the police. He thought maybe he told her to keep the door *closed*; he certainly slammed it, and he thought he said that.

As soon as it was shut it was very clear to him what

he had to do next. None of this was really happening, but even so he had to help the child – so he began to run along the gallery towards the child, and the man grasping the child, and the figure slumped against the bannisters, breathing painfully, who, he realized, was Tomas Court.

As soon as he moved – and only seconds had passed, but they felt like years – the man holding the child stopped scrabbling and banging at the elevator doors and ran off. He was still clutching the child, like some pale bulky parcel, and he still had his hand clamped across the child's mouth. Colin could see the child's hands plucking at air, and he felt outrage and incomprehension at this. He paused only for a moment by Tomas Court. Then, seeing he could scarcely breathe, let alone pursue, set off in pursuit himself. He expected the man to run down the stairs towards the entrance hall; but, since nothing was obeying the usual rules, he did the opposite and started to run up. Colin followed, running at speed, stumbling, then running again. His heart was now pounding; the man had a head start of almost two flights, and as he ran Colin had a clear sense that this was all a dream, and at any moment he would wake up.

'Stop, stop, stop,' he heard himself shout in this dream, and it struck him how absurd this was. Even so, he cried 'Stop' several times more. He changed it to 'Please, stop' on the sixth landing, which was even more absurd, and 'Don't, please, *don't*' on the eighth. He found he was saying something garbled and incoherent to a tiny, frightened, wizened, ancient face which popped out from behind a door on the ninth floor, but the door then slammed, and the bolts were drawn across. In his dream, Colin could then concentrate on what really mattered, which was making his legs move faster, and getting the air into his lungs, which were starting to seize up.

Reaching the top floor at last, he had a glassy sense that it was not a dream, after all, but that everything was now going to calm down; normality was about to prevail, no-one was going to get hurt, and the child – he realized the child must be Tomas Court's son – was going to be safe.

He had a *reason* for thinking this, he saw, stepping onto the landing and slowing his pace. The abductor, he could now see, was not a man, but a woman. He could see why he had made that mistake: the woman was wearing trousers and her hair was hacked raggedly short. He could also see that she was holding a knife – but he found he was not alarmed by the knife. A woman must be as incapable of hurting a child as he was of hurting a woman: this creed it did not occur to him to doubt. He felt totally sure that the instant the woman saw he did not intend to hurt her, she would give him the child and surrender the knife. Fighting to steady his breathing, he began to walk towards her.

'You're frightening him,' he began. 'He's only a little boy and he's terrified. Please, put him down. You can't want to hurt him. Give me the knife . . .'

The woman had been scratching and banging at the elevator doors. As soon as he spoke, she made a panting, grunting sound. She darted away, across the landing, which was large, and backed up against the bannisters. Colin hesitated; there was a sheer ten-storey drop behind her. He felt a vertiginous fear then; his shocked calm began to fragment; the floor began to move, and the dome tilted above his head.

'Precious, precious,' said the woman, and cut the child's face.

Blood welled; Colin looked at the blood welling up in disbelief. She had cut the boy just below the eye, very close to the eye; blood welled up and dripped down over her fingers, which remained clamped over the boy's mouth. Colin saw the child give one terrified convulsive

movement, then fall limp. He could both see and smell his terror now; he could also see that the knife, a long, thin switch-blade, was pressed up against the child's bare throat.

'Oh, dear God, what are you doing? What are you *doing*? You *cut* him,' He stared at the woman. 'You – how can you do that? You can't want to hurt a child. It's so wicked, *wicked*. Please – give him to me. I'm not going to touch you, or hurt you. Let him go. Let him go *at once* . . .'

'He stinks. Filthy little know-it-all.' The woman spoke in a low rapid voice, eying him. 'You take one more step and I'll jump.' She frowned. 'I'll cut his throat.'

'You can't do *both*. What are you *saying*? Look, please – listen to me. Why are you doing this? What's the *point*? You can't get away from here now. That elevator isn't working. Every resident in this building will have been calling the police . . . Please, give him to me.'

He stopped. He could hear just how stupid and fatally inadequate he sounded. He could not understand why these arguments, so true and so obvious, would not be properly expressed. He tried to look at the woman; think, *think*, said some irritating, confusing voice in his head. He began to see that the woman was very afraid; her face had a twitchy, jittery look; she was breathing in and out very fast and beginning to shake. Colin took another step forwards. He wanted to make a rush at her, a grab at her – but the knife was just under the boy's ear, and that ten-storey emptiness lay in wait.

'Precious. Precious baby,' said the woman, in a low crooning voice. She looked down at the boy; Colin risked another silent step forward. Her head jerked up and the white of her face flared at him.

'Do you have a baby?'

'No, not yet. Look – *please*. Let me help you. You need help . . .'

'Call the elevator. Tell Joe to bring the elevator *up* . . .'

Colin was afraid to move away to the elevator. If he did, he would be at a greater distance. She might jump.

'The elevator isn't working,' he began. 'I told you – it won't come. It's broken down. Listen—'

'I had a baby once.' Her eyes flashed at him. 'Didn't I, Jonathan? Where's my baby now? Flushed down some drain. Tossed out with the trash.' Her mouth moved. 'Get the elevator. Get the fucking elevator, right now, or I'll jump.'

She made a jerking movement and the child gave a moan of fear. Colin's heart leaped. He started to move towards her fast, because he suddenly saw with absolute clarity that if he did not act now, and act quickly, the unthinkable was going to happen right in front of his eyes, and fifteen seconds from now the boy would be dead. I'm going to *kill* her, Colin thought, moving, propelled on sudden violent rage, and realizing that he *could* kill her, if only he could get hold of her before she used the knife.

'Get the elevator, Colin,' said Tomas Court's voice. 'Get the elevator now. Do what she says.'

Colin stopped dead. Tomas Court had spoken sharply; he was standing on the far side of the landing, at the top of the last flight of stairs. Colin stared at his white face. He decided he was going mad; surely there was no way in which Court could have recovered and made it up those stairs? Yet there Court was, breathing quietly, if with obvious pain. He paused for only a second, looking at the woman and his son, then he began to walk towards them, his hand held out.

'Jonathan, don't move,' he said in a quiet voice. 'Just stay still. Colin, get the elevator, please. Now, Maria – do you want me to call you Maria? I don't think of you

by that name. I think of you as Tina. I always will, and always have – if you'd said yesterday that your name was Tina, it would have made all the difference. Didn't you realize that?'

The use of this name had a magical effect. The woman became still; she stared at Court and made an odd, gentle sound in her throat. Colin found he could breathe again. He darted across to the elevator and summoned it in the certain knowledge it would not come. Hope winged through him; he knew this was the correct thing to do, because Tomas Court had instructed him. Court knew this woman; he could *reach* her in a way Colin could not. Disaster was about to be averted, Colin thought. Two men against one woman was no contest, in any case. He could now see every frame of this movie playing itself out; it was a movie he'd seen a million times; it had a kindly director, who ensured that the hero disarmed the assailant, or, failing that, resolved everything quickly, without bloodshed, after a brief and well-choreographed fight.

At any moment, Tomas Court would give him a *signal*, Colin thought. He'd stop talking and give him a signal, and the two of them would launch some effective, concerted male attack. He moved back towards Court, who was still speaking. He found the scene in front of him would not stay still, but kept jerking about; he found Tomas Court was not only ignoring his presence and failing to give him any signal, but saying things that made very little *sense*.

'Didn't you get my messages?' he was saying, in a quiet, puzzled way. 'All those messages I sent? I don't understand why you're doing this. You must see – I can't talk to you now, not with the boy here; he's in the way. Look at me. Tell me you got those messages, Tina. Tell me you understood.'

The woman's grip on the boy slackened for a second. Her mouth moved. 'Messages?' She stared at Court in

a mesmerized way. 'I sometimes thought – when I was alone . . .'

'I can understand that.' Court had finally come to a halt a few feet in front of her. Colin edged his way to Court's side. He could see that Court was looking at the woman with tenderness and with regret.

'Don't be afraid,' he went on, in a quiet voice. 'Trust me. I'm not going to touch you – though I want to very much. All this time . . .' He gave a sigh. 'You know not one day has gone past without my thinking of you? I've read your letters a thousand times. I know them by heart. There's one you wrote—' He hesitated. 'And I keep it next to my heart.' He sighed. 'How is it you know me so well? You're closer to me than anyone I've ever known. I can talk to you without any fear of being misunderstood – and you can talk to me the same way. That's how close we are.' He held out his hand to her. 'Put the boy down, Tina. He's in the way. You're so very dear to me. Give me the knife.'

The woman began to cry. She cried in a heart-rending way, Colin thought, making ugly, gulping sounds, and twisting her face. Colin found he pitied her, and that Court's quiet words, for all their obvious effectiveness, made him uneasy. They were familiar to him, but he could not place them; recently, he felt, he had heard, seen, or used words that were very similar himself. He shifted his weight from his right foot to his left; he had some vague, nasty sensation of evil, breathing quietly, standing close.

'Hate you,' said the woman, glancing down. 'Hate you, hate you, hate you . . .'

'Of course.' Court glanced towards the knife; it had moved a little, but not, Colin thought, enough.

'Don't *always* hate you,' she added, in a low voice. An expression of irritation passed across Tomas Court's face. As soon as the woman saw it, she made a low,

moaning, anxious sound. Hope, and fear, flickered across her face.

'You know what I want, Tina?' Court fixed his pale gaze on her. 'I want you in my arms – and at this moment I want that more than anything else on this earth.'

'Lies.' The woman's eyes flashed at him. 'Lies, lies, lies, *lies*.'

'No. The absolute truth.' Court's pale gaze did not waver, but again that expression of irritation passed across his face. 'I'm not arguing with you, Tina. If you want to hurt me there are more imaginative ways of doing it than this. When I tell you to put him down, I mean it. Now do it.'

'Shan't.' She stared at him. Court, to Colin's alarm, gave a sudden shrug and a look of dismissal.

'Fine,' he said coldly. 'Fine. You're boring me. Jump.'

Colin stared at him in stupefaction. He heard himself make some low sound of fear and protest. 'Oh, *Christ*,' he said, starting to move forward, because he could see the woman's expression altering, and he could see her starting to turn towards that ten-storey drop. She lifted the boy high in her arms, and Colin knew that she was about to throw him. The child gave one terrified cry; Court did not move, and as Colin lurched forward, the woman dropped the boy at his feet.

Colin made a grab for him; he got his arms around him and started to scoop him up. Neither Court nor the woman had moved, Colin thought, and he could sense that they were looking at each other, that their gaze, which he could feel rather than see, was interlocked. He gripped Jonathan more tightly, and the instant he touched him, the boy began to fight. He was half-crazed with fear, and the fear gave him strength. Colin was straightening up with the boy in his arms, trying to back away, to get him out of the woman's reach, and the boy was *fighting* him. It was like trying to hold an armful

of fish. The boy threshed and squirmed; he rained down punches and slaps on Colin's head and face. He sank his teeth into Colin's hand, and as Colin tried to catch hold of his arms, he began to kick and scream. He caught hold of Colin's hair, and tugged at it. 'Jonathan, Jonathan,' Colin said, trying to calm him, trying to get him out of the woman's reach and away from that ten-storey drop. The boy rose up in his arms, arching and yelping. For a moment Colin could see nothing but his flailing arms, and that moment was all it took.

Darkness moved; something clattered to the floor, and somewhere to the side of him, something bunched. Over the boy's shoulder, past his white face, Colin saw Tomas Court enfold the woman in his arms. He knew that was all right, because he had heard her drop the knife. He started to tell Jonathan this, that it was all right, that he was safe, that it was over – but Jonathan was still yelping and screaming and trying to scratch his face.

Colin ducked his head away; he heard a crunching sound, then a sharp exhalation of breath, and he began to realize that some blow had been struck. He started to turn, and heard himself make some sound, of fear, of protest. 'Daddy, Daddy, Daddy,' Jonathan cried, and Colin froze in horrified disbelief.

He watched the woman move upwards and over the bannisters with a gymnast's grace. She went over backwards, head first, in a beautiful dive; he saw her eyes widen and her hands grasp space. She seemed to hang there, supported by air, for an immensely long time, then she disappeared from sight. Tomas Court stepped back from the bannisters. He brushed at his jacket – one sleeve was torn; he stood listening, white-faced.

There was a silence, then a faint, thin cry, then a thud. Colin, shocked, appalled, unable to move, did not need

such trash."

They walked along the river and Robert decided to string a net, but he did not trap a king salmon until Tuesday, when the afternoon skies boomed with thunder and rain poured down with such intensity they feared the clouds were emptying every drop.

"The whole country is going to be a river."

Mud gummed up along busy streets pulling soggy miners into the ooze up to their calves. A man laboring on the mountain was struck dead by lightning and typhoid continued its ominous course. A miner named Carson had died of it earlier; now the second Carson brother succumbed.

The rain brought cold nights and seeing Tillie shivering, Robert carried the stove into the tent.

"Oh, this terrible mud," Mathilda complained. "Some day I hope we can live where the streets are bricked."

Robert arrived at the store tent early Thursday morning and found Ed McGrath busy at work.

"Good morning, Ed. Here already?"

Ed issued a grudging "Morning," without interrupting his packing.

Robert noticed Ed kept his back turned and went to investigate. He caught his partner removing two good cigars from every box, replacing them with cigars that had been soaked.

"Ed. What are you doing? You can't do that!"

"Why not? The men'll be glad to get them. They're dry now. Who can tell?"

"Anybody who smokes them. That's a scurvy trick."

"Maybe they'll think they wet them themselves. It cuts our losses." Ed sneered, the corners of his mouth turning down as he continued switching.

"It's underhanded." Robert recoiled. "It's crooked."

I won't have it."

"You have to put up with stuff in a partnership," Ed said unctuously. "Just like we put up with your wife."

"Look," Robert flared, voice rising, words taking on an edge. "You enjoyed her cooking. She's been working here—selling everything that's been sold. That's been at no cost to the partnership. The Schoenbecks have contributed more than their share."

"Share of low prices, you mean. Everything marked." Ed grunted and swore.

"Yeah, marked," Robert shouted. He felt his stomach cramp, the muscles in his shoulder tighten. Color fanned up his neck and diffused across his face. "You want to treat everybody who comes in like a side-show sucker. Charging all the sucker will pay."

"Why not? It's good business."

"It's thievery."

"Who you callin' a thief?"

"If the boot fits, wear it."

"I'm quitting this lousy partnership," Ed shouted, shaking a clenched fist. "I'm gonna take my share and clear out."

"Nobody's stopping you."

Tom ducked into the tent. "What's the matter? What? . . ."

Ed stopped. "All right. We'll dissolve the partnership." He made a slashing gesture. "I'll pay you what you got in it."

"Oh no," Robert said. "You'll pay what it's worth—what the goods are worth here. We put in a lot of back breaking work."

"Yeah, we did," Tom cut in.

"We have to divide the grub," Robert insisted. "That's only fair. And the cigars. Equal shares, wet and dry—no fooling around."

"All right. You set the price on everything else if you know so much. I'll decide whether I buy or sell."

Robert's mind raced. Had Ed outfoxed him? If he set the price too low his partner would buy—if he estimated high Ed would sell. Perhaps it was fair.

"Set the price," Ed growled. "Make it snappy."

Robert walked around, studying the stock, computing its value. "All the goods besides the grub and the cigars, plus the canvas and frame under it, seventeen hundred dollars."

"I'll buy it."

"You got the money? When you gonna settle?"

"Er—ah, in a couple weeks," Ed faltered. "It'll take a couple weeks to scrape up the money. When we sell . . ."

"A couple weeks then. We'll operate today. Tomorrow morning it's yours."

The McGraths left and presently Mathilda arrived.

"I sold out," Robert said. "I got tired of their outrageous conduct."

"It's about time. Did you get the cash?"

"No. He's going to pay in a couple weeks."

Mathilda bit her lip and turned away. "I'm going back to our tent."

She was glad the arrangement with the McGraths had been terminated, but her mind filled with worry. With no money coming in from the store, if Ed McGrath failed to pay, they'd soon be facing financial ruin.

A pleasant-faced woman interrupted the turmoil of her thoughts.

"Hello. I'm Mrs. John Healy. I had to come and meet the competition."

"Oh, we didn't have that much."

"But everything you have is in great demand."

"It won't matter now," Mathilda said. "My hus-

band sold his interest to Mr. McGrath. The food and sundries will be divided . . ."

"I'm sorry, I didn't know. I was only teasing. I didn't meant to intrude on private matters. We've known your husband for years—ever since we first came to Forty-Mile. My husband speaks highly of him."

"That's nice to hear."

"I simply had to meet you. Everyone's talking about the honeymooners."

"Oh," Mathilda said, feeling a hint of color rising to her cheeks. "There are other newlyweds. On the trail . . ."

Mrs. Healy smiled, emitting a cheerful laugh. "Newlyweds aren't all honeymooners. Honeymooning is a state of mind. Believe me, I know. Men soon get wrapped up in business. How many times have I told John, 'If you couldn't argue, scold, and gripe, you'd stop running the store.'"

"He has a fine business—and building another. Last evening I saw a steamer come in. The *John J. Healy*. My, I was certainly impressed."

"The company boat. Yes." Mrs. Healy sighed. "We were expecting two hundred fifty tons but only one hundred fifty arrived. The way folks keep pouring in there's concern we won't have enough food this winter."

"We've been worried too. Robert said food will be scarce. I'm even worried about our money. I hate to carry it with me and I dare not leave it in the tent. When we get our cabin built it's going to have a lock!"

"I don't blame you. Times have changed. With all the riffraff arriving it's no longer safe to leave your money behind. Perhaps I can help. Why don't you let John safeguard your money in our store? He has a secure place."

"Thank you. I believe I'll do that—if Robert hasn't spent it all."

Mrs. Healy laughed pleasantly. "You'll do all right. You may be a honeymooner but you have an excellent grasp of the essentials."

"Hello there," Fritz Kloke called, walking up with a lolling gait.

"Mrs. Healy, do you know Mr. Kloke?"

"Yes, I've made his acquaintance. Hello, Mr. Kloke."

"Mrs. Healy." He touched the bill of his cap.

"Nice to see you."

Fritz flashed a grin. "Nice to see you."

"I really must be going," Mrs. Healy said. "I just wanted to welcome you to Dawson City."

"Thank you. Call on me again."

"And you do the same."

"Now there's an attractive woman," Fritz Kloke said, staring in her wake.

"Yes," Mathilda agreed.

"I'd like to see Robert. Do you expect him?"

"I don't know. He's out looking for building supplies."

"Would you tell him I bought him an interest in a claim?"

Mathilda's smile caught and became fixed. "I sure will. He'll be delighted." Behind the smile she suppressed rising apprehension.

"I was hoping to see him. The seller wants a down payment."

"Good-bye then. Keep the inner soul serene."

"You too."

Robert returned in a euphoric mood. "Good news," he caroled. "I bought a claim from Bob Lowery. Paid a hundred dollars down. Then I found a raft of logs and paid another hundred . . ."

"Oh." Mathilda's voice fell.

Bafflement struggled across his face. "I thought you'd be pleased."

"I am, about the logs. Nothing could thrill me more. But the claim—you bought a claim? I wish you'd have been here. Fritz Kloke stopped by to tell you he bought you an interest in a claim. The seller wants a down payment."

"Two claims in one day? Wonderful! That's great!"

"Is it?"

"What's wrong, darling?" He saw pain in her eyes, the quiver of a raw touched nerve at the corner of her mouth.

"Robert, don't you realize what money is worth?" She flung her arms down helplessly. Her shoulders sagged in utter defeat. "You spend, spend, spend—as if there's an endless supply. Where's all this money coming from?"

"From the business."

"From the business?" she demanded, voice cracking, her eyes an arena of anguish. "You sold the business without collecting a dime. All you have is a promise of payment—in two weeks. A maybe. When I go to a store I have to pay cash."

"Healy," Robert said. "Jack McQuesten always staked us."

"Jack isn't here." She sniffed, lips trembling. "Things aren't the way they were when you were here last. This is a new era. The old days are gone forever. Can't you see that? You have a family to think about." Tears sprang into her eyes.

"I'm sorry," he said, feeling helpless against her tears.

"Sorry isn't enough."

"What can I do?"

"Let me handle the business."

"What?" He was aghast. Anger sharpened his tone. "Do you think you know more about this country than I do?"

"No, of course not." She broke down, body racked with sobs. After a minute she found her voice. "Haven't you heard a thing I've said? I'm not talking about mining or freighting or buying dogs or building cabins. I'm talking about money—managing money. We can't go on buying for cash if you keep selling everything on bedrock. I'm talking about using sound business principles. Of using restraint. Somebody has to manage the money in this family and that somebody is me."

Her chin came out and he saw fire in her eyes, a fine dew of sweat over her tender mouth.

"Robert, don't you see, you're the expert on Alaska, but I'm the expert on money. All my life I've been keeping books for father. You think he's well-to-do? Far from it. Father never has a dime—wouldn't have if it wasn't for me. You know what he does? Treats patients for two chickens, a ham, two prints of butter, two dozen eggs. I told him right out, if an office call is a dollar, we won't accept fourteen cents worth of eggs for payment. I started showing those people the books. I said, 'Bring in more butter. Bring in more eggs!'"

Reeling from her fury he heard himself say, "Well, all right. You be the bookkeeper."

"That means sharing ideas in advance," she said, making a chopping gesture, waving a scolding finger. "It doesn't mean coming home, saying, 'Tillie, I just put down a hundred dollars on a claim.' It means coming to me, asking, 'What can I spend on a mine? Do we have money to put down?' It means understanding the limit of our debts. Do you understand?"

"Yah." A spreading grin transfigured his face and a

shallow laugh anointed his words. "Do you know you're beautiful when you're mad?"

For a moment her eyes failed to obscure a petulant rage, then her expression softened. "I am?"

"You sure are."

"Do you mean it?"

"I mean it."

She flung herself into his arms. "Oh, Robert, you're so good. I love you so much." *Our financial problems are settled!*

"I love you, little one." He looked down and chuckled. "Maybe not so little . . . soon."

"It's going to be a big change for you . . . coming to me before you spend."

"Hey! Can't I have any money of my own? It isn't dignified for a man to ask his wife if he can have fifty cents for cigars or a dollar for drinks."

"No, it isn't," she said solemnly. "I'm going to see that you have some personal spending money every week."

"Oh, you're so good," he mimicked playfully. A great tenderness went into his kiss.

"Rob-bert . . . ooooooooo."

In the morning while Robert checked on a claim, Mathilda went on her first mission of the day. She carried a buckskin pouch to Healy's store for safe-keeping.

The A-C Company's tiny sternwheeler *Alice* arrived on July fifteenth and later the same day the *Bella* docked. Mathilda attempted to get their mail but a large crowd milled around the warehouse and she came away with nothing more than an orange. She shopped again the next day and bought a dozen eggs for \$2.50; five pounds of potatoes, \$1.00; a dozen oranges, \$3.00; a can of cabbage, 50¢; and a can of corn, 50¢.

Cumulous clouds gathered, forming gray beards over the sullen hills, threatening to dump their moisture in an angry shower. Mathilda hurried home.

When the storm broke she and Robert huddled in the gloom of the tent listening to a heavy rain scrubbing the canvas.

"I dropped off some letters at the *Bella*. Captain Dixon invited us to call on him . . . to have some bottled beer."

"I wish we could have. We would, if it hadn't been for this rain. Will it never stop?"

"Did you make any progress on the cabin?"

"A little. I paid a man twenty-five dollars to haul logs from the waterfront to our lot and I hired Lon Richards to help. We notched the first layer before it started to pour."

During the night the sky cleared and the men resumed work at dawn. People sloshed through muddy streets, among them Mrs. John Healy.

"Mrs. Schoenbeck, would you like to go with me and pay a call on Lottie?"

"Lottie?" Mathilda gasped. "Why I—I—"

Mrs. Healy laughed at her reaction. "She's been taken in by some ladies of the community and has promised to reform. They've started a home to aid sick and homeless women. A number of the ladies are Christian Scientists and I must say they have a worthwhile cause."

"In that case," Mathilda said reluctantly, "I'll go."

"Good. We'll mush over there together."

"Mush is right. This whole town is mush. This interminable rain—oh this inexhaustible mud."

In a nearby cabin the woman Lottie, a hollow-eyed slattern, lay on a cot. "I'm glad you came," she said. A cough wracked her body. "I'm going to lead a better life. All I want to do is go home to Mama."

"That's an excellent way to start."

"I am. I'm going out on the next boat . . ."

"What a strange woman," Mathilda whispered as she and Mrs. Healy were leaving. "It's the first time I ever visited"—she stumbled on the word—"a prostitute."

"Honey, if you talk to three women in this town, two are liable to be prostitutes. I don't even think of it any more. One doesn't have to invite them to one's home. That's where I draw the line."

Robert did not return until midnight. Cold and lonely, unable to sleep, Mathilda huddled in the tent listening to the rain.

"My stars, you're drenched." She helped him out of his wet clothes. "Did you get any logs?"

"Seven. I ran them up on shore."

"Look at you. Your skin is full of water."

"All I want to do is sleep."

It continued to rain all the next day, but the men hauled the logs to the lot. The rain stopped Thursday noon, and when Robert returned from working on the cabin, he found Tillie sitting in the twilight, reading *Der Katolisher Westen*, a month-old newspaper from Dubuque.

"You're home early, sweetheart. I'm surprised to see you. There's still daylight."

"I'll go back after I've had lunch. I needed some coal oil and went to the store. Any news?"

"It says Laura Rhomberg got married."

"I have some news too. On the way to the store I bumped into Billy Olmstead. He looked peaked, I thought." Robert hesitated, choosing his words with care. "I bought his claim. It took all the money I had."

"You what?" Mathilda recoiled, leaped out of the camp chair and flung down the newspaper. "You what?" she cried, nostrils flaring. "How could you? I

thought we decided to talk things over before you did anything foolish."

"Foolish? Now stop that," he said reprovingly. "Get a hold of yourself. Calm down."

"We had a deal. An agreement! You broke your word!"

The muscles at the back of his jaw tensed. "Yes, we had a deal," he said firmly. "The money I had was mine."

"Of course it's yours. Ours," she corrected. "It's all the same money. When I said you could spend your own money I meant money for beer, for cigars—pocket money—not all our money, not hundreds of dollars!"

"B—but . . ."

"All right!" She raised her arms and flung them down. "If you don't want to honor our agreement, I'm going back to Dubuque. Me and the baby are not going to starve to death in this godforsaken hellhole. I'm sick of rain and all this mud, mud, mud. I'm going home!"

The flame and fury in her eyes were drenched by tears. Seeing her angry tears he realized that the right or wrong of the argument didn't matter—not if he lost her. Relenting, with treacle in his voice, he said, "Very well. We'll leave for Dubuque. On the first boat. I'm going with you." His arms came up, hands spread wide to welcome her into his embrace. "I'm never leaving you."

"Rob-bert."

"I'm sorry," he said quietly. "I'm in the wrong. I've been a lone wolf so long I didn't . . . didn't think ahead. I don't know if I can keep my promise."

"I—I didn't think either." She sniffed, tears again threatening. "It's my fault. I've been so nervous and upset."

"You have a right to be upset. Rain and mud and mosquitoes. This is no life for you."

"I want to be with you."

"I'm going to be with you." He hesitated, searching for a way to reason with her but a protest rose in him like steam and his words rushed out. "What am I going to do when a hot deal comes along? If I'm in a saloon there may only be two minutes to close. I can't say, 'Excuse me, I have to talk with my wife first.' I can't do that, can I?"

"I can see that," she admitted. "What *are* we going to do? I know. I'm going to set up a fund for business. For ventures. You have to see that it pays. You're not robbing the food account. Ever!" Realizing she'd been scolding she relented, smiled and went to pour a cup of tea. Carrying the cup to him, she held him in a one-armed embrace.

He bent down and kissed her. "Tillie. Tillie. I love you."

Her mind whirled. *Can I have a secret go-back-to-Dubuque fund. No. You don't dare.* "Robert, if we had to go to Dubuque, could we sell the claims for cash? Could we?"

"If worst gets to worst. A person might not get top dollar. You know," he said philosophically, "the only time we quarrel is over gold. Noble voluptuous gold."

"Noble? Corruptible gold, you mean. That for which every virtue is sold and nearly every vice. That for which countless slaves have died and nations marched to war. Not to mention ruined marriages."

"Not ours, Tillie. Not ours. Did you know gold is mentioned in the Bible more than four hundred times?"

"Really? How do you know?"

"When it gets lonely in a cabin men will count most anything. By the way, did I tell you Fritz Kloke is

coming for supper tomorrow? Nine Above has made him a rich man. He's going out on the next boat. I have more news—I'm losing Lon Richards. He's going prospecting. I'll have to find another man to help build the cabin."

Early Sunday morning, its twin stacks smoking, the *Portus B. Weare* came in bringing passengers, freight, and mail. At noon Monday, Mrs. Ray Stewart stopped by with a gift of dates and nuts that had been on board.

"You know, Lottie's going out today," Mrs. Stewart said. "She can't take her furniture. Why don't we buy it?"

"Why didn't I think of that? Let's go over there . . ." Mathilda hastened to get her hat.

Nearly out of breath by the time they reached McGrath's store, they saw furniture being carried out of Lottie's cabin.

"You're five minutes too late," said Lottie. "I sold everything for a hundred and fifty dollars."

"Oh . . ."

"It's my own fault," Mathilda confided to Mrs. Stewart, admonishing herself. "If I hadn't been so standoffish I would have realized she had furniture to sell. I could have been here sooner."

"Yes. It goes to show—if you don't make friends with everyone up here, you're liable to miss something."

The ladies spent the afternoon sewing.

"I won't be seeing you for a while," Mrs. Stewart said. "Ray and I are moving to our place on the Klondike."

"I'm going to miss you."

"And I you. The *Weare's* leaving at six. I know you and Robert want to say good-bye to your friends . . ."

Robert halted work on the cabin and called for

Tillie. "I'm glad you didn't get the furniture," he said. "Every time I looked at her chest of drawers I'd think of that woman."

A crowd gathered at the waterfront and presently they saw Fritz Kloke approaching.

"I want to thank you for the letter of introduction to your father," Fritz said.

Robert nodded. "It's not the first one Tillie's handed out. The doctor will have a steady stream of visitors." His voice lowered. "You're leaving in style. Did you know that Lottie's aboard?"

"She is? Good old Lottie. Then the trip won't be boring." Fritz winked mischievously.

"You men!"

Fritz grinned. "No harm in talking."

"Lottie's reformed," Mathilda asserted.

"That's what I hear," Fritz said soberly. "If it's up to me she'll stay that way." He extended his hand. "*Halten sich munter.*"

"You stay cheerful too," Robert said, gripping his hand.

Tillie took his hand. "*Aufwiedersehen, Fritz.*"

"*Aufwiedersehen.*" His face beaming, Fritz went aboard.

"I'm going to miss him," Mathilda said. "He always had so much news." She took Robert's arm. "I went for a walk earlier. You're making excellent progress on our cabin."

"Yah. We'll move in the first of August—right on time. Of course it won't be ready. I still have to build a bed, wardrobe, bureau, a couple tables, and a kitchen cupboard."

"I love the porch."

Merriment came into Robert's face. "What's good enough for the fallen angels of Chapel Hill is good enough for us."

"I must say I'm surprised to hear you mention them."

"That's all I did—mention."

"Actually it's not a veranda like those women have."

"No. Speaking as a carpenter it's not a porch either. What I did was to build the cabin six feet longer than usual and recess the entryway. The door's built at a right angle to the main end wall." Pride flowed into his voice. "That way a man can step outside without getting rained on."

As Robert planned, on the first day of August Mathilda carried her cooking utensils into their new home. Mathilda came out and watched the men shoveling sod on the gently sloping roof. Build of logs, notched and squared at the corners, the cabin sat on a rise a short distance from a trail that would someday become a street. At the alcove entrance surrounding the door, boards extended from the ground to the gable of the roof, a pleasant contrast to the horizontal lines of the logs.

"It's only a shell now," Robert said. "But by tonight we'll have some chairs. The windows are going to be a problem." He stuck his arm through an open space and waved. "I hope some come in before it snows."

"I just love it," Mathilda said, a declaration repeated a couple days later when they sat down for their first meal around a table. "I have a wonderful neighbor. Mrs. Wentzel, a lovely woman."

"I thought you'd like her."

"Yesterday she gave me two pairs of baby socks, baby buttons, and embroidery. Today she came with a hood, lace, silk, and a wash cloth."

"I'm glad you like her. She'll be good company when I'm gone. I have to go out to Hunker. It'll take me several days."

"Several days?" Mathilda felt her heart sigh with loneliness. Her eyes came to rest on sunlight playing through a crack between the logs, a spot that remained to be chinked against a howling wind, bitter cold, and the gloom of winter.

Her thoughts did not linger on work to be done on the cabin. When Robert was gone Mathilda viewed the colors of autumn—the fiery gold and orange of birches and aspens, the crimson purple of the distant hills—and longed for autumn in Dubuque, a season much like spring, with idyllic Indian summer days and scarlet oak leaves arrayed against the still green Wisconsin hills. At home there had been no feeling of foreboding, but here one could not escape it. All too soon the landscape would be a dismal gray and by the time the first clean blanket of snow came to brighten the hills she'd feel all the more isolated. With friends nearby, how could she feel so all alone? It took all the effort she could muster to still the plaintive voice that cried out of her depths. "I want to go home to Dubuque."

Robert had been gone four days—it seemed like ten—before she heard his call.

"Hello. I'm back."

"I missed you so." Her lips found his.

"I missed you."

He took her hand. "Come, sit down . . ."

"What . . . ?"

"I have something for you." When she was seated he knelt at her feet. "Here's your pay. I collected seven hundred dollars from Ed McGrath—part of what he owes us for the stock we sold him. I just paid you, darling. Now you pay me."

"You sweetheart." She cupped his face, bent down and kissed him. "You dear. How much do you need?"

"Five dollars, I guess. I hope you'll make it ten."

She gave him ten dollars.

He rose. "I found work. A man wants me to help him build a cabin in Lousetown. He'll pay ten dollars a day. I told him I'd do it. I have to go over there anyway—to divide the cigars in our cache."

"I thought the McGraths would have done that by now."

"No. They're too busy in the store. I hear business has dropped off now that you're not there. I was thinking . . ."

"Your mind never rests."

"What did you do when I was gone?"

"Miss you dreadfully."

"Besides that."

"Mrs. Wentzel and I picked cranberries and currants. I sewed a rug." She stopped. Robert wasn't listening. His mind had moved to something else.

"I think we ought to have a store here. When I get the cigars . . ."

"That's not a bad idea. The whole town is buzzing about a food shortage. Prices are bound to go sky high. We can use extra money to buy grub."

"Yah. That's what I figured." *How do you buy grub that doesn't exist?*

Mathilda detected concern in his voice and saw that worry lined his brow. "I've been thinking of selling my fancy clothes," she said. "They're no use to me here. If I wore them folks'd think I lived on Chapel Hill. And in my condition . . ."

Robert shook his head. "You're the limit."

Each day when he returned from the job in Louse-town he carried a crate of cigars on his shoulder.

Out for a Sunday afternoon walk Robert and Mathilda encountered the captain of the tug *Sea Lion*. "You should see the people coming," said the captain. "Thousands line the trail. There'll be nine thousand here by the end of winter."

"Oh no," Robert said helplessly. "Not that many."

"Take my word for it. The country down below's gone wild. Everybody's got Klondikitis. It's a stampede of monumental proportions—an unruly mob."

"Now I am worried," Robert said. "So many?"

When they returned to the cabin Mr. and Mrs. Hawkins were there and shared their concern.

"I'll tell the world I'm worried," rasped Mrs. Hawkins. "How are we going to feed an army? Tell me that?"

"Eight head of beef came in today," Hawkins said.

"That's only a one-day supply," Robert said. "We'd better get in line at the stores . . ."

Crowds thronged around the warehouses on Monday, August 16, and at the A-C Mathilda managed to buy a box of prunes.

A man came running out of Healy's gesturing and speaking excitedly. "Big Alex McDonald just bought twelve thousand dollars worth of grub!"

An angry murmur rose from the crowd.

"That's not fair!"

"It sure ain't."

"He can afford it," a man shouted. "He owns three miles of claims."

"Not that much," Robert whispered. "He has twenty or thirty claims—he's borrowed so heavily that he can't afford to have men take off work. That's why he's buying grub."

"To think a man with millions has worries . . ."

Voices became heated.

"C'mon," Robert said. "We might as well go. Why don't we look at Clarence Berry's nugget?"

In a nearby window they saw the celebrated thirty-ounce lump of gold.

"Five hundred eighty-three dollars and twenty-five cents."

"Hmft." Tillie sniffed. "If things get bad this

winter it might not be worth as much as a potato."

"Greetings, my friends."

They turned and saw Reverend Bowen walking rapidly.

"Nice to see you again," said the minister. He hurriedly shook hands with each of them. "I'd like to stop and visit but I'm on the way to perform my first wedding—I fear I'm a little late. May I call on you soon?"

"It'd be our pleasure," Robert called after him.

At four in the morning on the seventeenth, the *Bella* announced her arrival with a lusty blowing of her whistle.

Awakened early, morning chores completed, Mathilda sat at the table writing letters. It's time to tell Father I'm pregnant, she reflected. Of course he'd worry—the dear—but she'd already waited such a long time to tell him. If she delayed until the arrival of the blessed event, he'd be terribly hurt. Having saved the best news until last, she closed the letter and reached for another sheet. Now she could also tell brother John.

Delivering the letters to Captain E. D. Dixon, Mathilda stood for a few minutes on the deck of the *Bella* watching the loading and unloading, and realized there'd be an enormous crowd at the stores tomorrow. An unhappy crowd. Men who stepped aside to allow women to go to the head of the line to get mail were not so thoughtful when it came time to buy food, now that supplies had grown scarce.

"Well, this is a surprise," Mrs. Wentzel exclaimed when they arrived at the A-C store the following day and found it closed. "I thought they'd have something available by now."

"So did I," Mathilda said. "But look—the card says, 'Closed All Day.' We might as well go home."

That afternoon Violet Raymond came calling. "I heard you had some fancy things for sale," said the saloon girl whose notorious relationship with Antone Stander was the talk of the town.

"Yes. Come in. I'll be happy to show you." *There's nothing shy or demure about her.*

Violet inspected a dress and lace collar. "I might buy these," she said. "I'll have to think it over."

The visit of Violet Raymond provided a sparkling topic of conversation when Mrs. Tim Crowley stopped by.

"She made me feel like poor relations," Mathilda said with a chuckle. "Imagine. Feeling lower than a saloon girl."

"I suppose that's their way," said the moon-faced Mrs. Crowley. "They do it to you before you can do it to them."

"She was certainly forward. I guess that's why she's a saloon girl."

"I tried to get some windows today," said Mrs. Crowley. "No luck. I see you need windows too."

"I sure do." Mathilda spread her hands in a comical gesture. "No windows. I've got nothing to be proud about. No wonder I get treated like poor relations." She walked to the stove and placed a kettle over the flame. "Robert went up the Klondike for a raft of logs. Why don't you stay and have supper with me?"

On Thursday Mathilda and her neighbor Mrs. Wentzel again attempted to buy food and windows but were unsuccessful. However, Mrs. Crowley managed to purchase some windows and stayed for supper to celebrate.

Ice froze on puddles during the night but the temperature soared on Friday, the twentieth of August, providing a warm and pleasant day for the opening of St. Mary's Hospital. Robert arrived home

at ten, having been away four days.

"I have to leave again first thing in the morning," he said. "To get more logs."

"I'm going to miss you. Ever so . . ." Pangs of loneliness gripped her heart and she wondered if she could keep her sanity when the wind howled and flung up twenty foot drifts of eighty-below-zero snow. She'd heard about cabin fever, the dreaded monotony that tried men's souls and rendered some insane. "By then I'll have the baby to keep me company," she reasoned. "I'll have someone if Robert isn't here." *Can I care for a baby if the temperature drops to a hundred below outside?* "I'll have to," she told herself with less than complete assurance. "I'll have to."

On a Saturday shopping tour to the A-C store Mathilda bought two windows. Robert came home at ten o'clock Sunday night and promised, "I'll put them in first thing in the morning."

Rising at dawn Robert fed the dogs and reached for a tape measure. "Times are changing," he muttered as he hammered and sawed. "The Mounties are asking duty on everything—twenty percent on all the gold we find. A couple fellows say the official rate is ten percent. I'm going to talk with the gold commissioner and get that straight. Now we have to pay for all the logs we get and all the firewood. We need cutting permits. It's absolutely outrageous!"

"That's because of all the people coming in—the type of people. The outcasts of society. If you saw them in Dubuque, you'd swear they just emptied the jail. That's the truth."

"We had good boys up here before," Robert said defensively.

"When there were only a few men I suppose a maverick had to be on his best behavior in order to survive."

peering out Robert saw a man approaching. When the man left he took a sled dog with him.

"I just sold Jumbo for seventy-five dollars," Robert reported.

Water froze every night now, but the days remained warm and pleasant. Robert and two men left for Dominion Creek and that afternoon Violet Raymond came across the street for another look at Mathilda's finery. She inspected the heels and toes of four silk stockings. "These are hardly worn."

"That's right. I wore them for my wedding and, I think, on the train."

"Maybe they'll bring me luck. How much are you asking?"

"Five dollars a pair."

"I'll take both pair." Violet quickly folded the stockings and placed them in her bag. "I'll be over and pay you tomorrow."

Violet Raymond did not return Friday as promised, nor did she appear on Saturday.

"I shouldn't have sold on bedrock," Mathilda conceded to Mrs. Wentzel on Sunday when her neighbor brought over a plate of hot biscuits and cranberry sauce. "Here I paid five dollars to Dr. LeBlanc for medicine he sent over to rub on my breasts. I planned to use the money from the stockings." She shrugged and her face slowly took on a pensive determined look.

"Dr. LeBlanc—was that the man who stopped?"

"No. That was a miner who came to tell me he met Robert on the way to Sulfur Creek—for me not to worry. Robert's going to be gone a little longer. Worry's all I've done this weekend. On top of everything a couple of our dogs have run off."

"They'll be back when they get hungry."

"I don't know. I hope so."

"I brought you some Christian Science books."

"Fine." An inflexible quality entered Mathilda's voice. "I'm not going over there now—on a Sunday—but tomorrow . . ." Momentary embarrassment spread across her face. "I spoke out loud, did I not? I was thinking . . ."

Mrs. Wentzel chuckled. "I believe you've decided to present a bill to Miss Violet Raymond."

At four in the afternoon on Monday, armed with an umbrella, Mathilda crossed the thoroughfare, strode into the saloon and walked up to Violet Raymond. "I've come for my ten dollars!"

"Oh, yes," Violet said, as if the matter was of no consequence. She turned to a man seated at a card table. "Anton. Would you give her ten dollars."

"Huh? Yeah, sure."

Mathilda bobbed her head slightly, uttered a crisp "Thank you," and marched out, looking neither left nor right.

Robert returned after an absence of eight days and went through the ritual of kneeling at her feet to present the fifty dollars he'd earned sawing logs. "How was it? Were you lonely?"

"Ever so. I visited with the ladies and sewed . . . but nothing can take your place."

He watched her hide the money. "I—ah—" He paused. "I bought a seventy-five-foot fraction—Number Seven on Sulfur Creek." He waited for a reaction that did not come.

"A fraction?" she asked after a moment.

"Dick Lowe made a fortune mining a fraction."

"Are the men selling off a few feet at a time?"

"Not really. During the original stampede there was absolute chaos. Some men staked claims that were too long. Later, when Mr. Ogilvie surveyed, there were sometimes fractions left over. Whoever

staked and made it to the recorder first got the fraction."

"Did you pay . . . ?"

"I bought on bedrock," he said quickly.

"That's better than I did," she admitted ruefully. "I learned a lot while you were gone. Violet Raymond came over and bought two pairs of my silk stockings. She didn't pay. I finally had to go over and collect my money."

"You went into a saloon?" he asked in dismay.

"You didn't?"

"I certainly did." She placed her hands on her hips.

"It's going to take more than Violet Raymond to make a fool out of me."

"I don't want you associating with saloon girls," he said sharply.

"Violet must have some redeeming qualities," Mathilda teased. "She has Anton Stander buying up every diamond in town."

"That's his business. I don't want you talking with saloon girls."

"There are so few women here."

His face remained stern and rebuking.

"All right," she said. "I'll try not to associate with them." *Not unless I have to.*

He saw the supply of tinned food had not increased during his absence. The lines in his brow deepened.

"That's not enough grub to last all winter."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Mathilda stood at the window and watched Big Alex McDonald plodding down the path, shoulders hunched under a floppy black sou'wester, enormous hands laboring like flippers.

"He reminds me of a walrus," she said. "His droopy moustache is something you'd expect to see in a tent show. Nothing about him reminds me of a king."

"Ah, but he is," Robert said. "King of the Yukon. The richest man up here."

"I'll say one thing for him. He's certainly persistent. That makes three times he's been here today."

"He'll be back."

"Again?"

"Yah. Once he gets hold of an idea he hangs on like a bulldog. I told him I wouldn't sell to him. I'd sell with him. Maybe some of the good fortune that showers on him will rain down on us."

"It'll be something to tell our grandchildren."

"Our grandchildren won't be interested. If we're poor, they'll say we were foolish for mushing up here. If we make a fortune they won't question the source."

"Imagine—being in partnership with the King of the Yukon."

"It's not that spectacular. The boys have a joke—

Alex has bought so many claims that he goes up to total strangers on the street and asks, 'Do I have a deal with you?' I guess it's true."

"I'll be surprised if Mr. McDonald sells. I hear he only buys . . ."

"I think he'll sell. He's granted dozens of lays." Seeing Tillie's puzzled expression, Robert explained. "A man who owns a lay can dig all the gold he wants. He keeps half for himself and gives half to Alex. The advantage of a lay is that it inspires hard work and generates lots of gold. With all the men working for him, and Alex getting half, you can see how quickly he's piled up millions."

"My . . ."

"There's a disadvantage though. A man working a lay may only pursue rich gravel and ignore the rest. His work may not be thorough."

"Ah, I see."

The cabin door rattled to a heavy knocking.

"He's back," Mathilda said and went to answer it. Alex spoke from the threshold. No emotion appeared on his fleshy face. "I'll do it. I'll sell. The papers will be ready tomorrow forenoon. We'll meet with Fergusson then." He closed the door behind him.

"Fifteen thousand dollars," Robert said. "On bedrock. We won't know until next June or July if we made a good deal or not." Robert knew Tillie would be upset about his selling on bedrock. "I reserved a hundred fifty feet," he said quickly. "I can work it myself any time I wish."

Sunday morning, while Robert went in search of logs to sell, Mathilda invited Mrs. Wentzel and Mrs. Fergusson, the wife of the man who'd purchased the claim, to attend midafternoon services in Reverend Bowen's log cabin. Five women and ten men gathered to worship.

The first snowfall of the season arrived the following Wednesday and draped the area around the cabin in a fluffy white blanket that remained undisturbed until a man tracked up to the door seeking to buy a dog. Mathilda sold Curly for seventy-five dollars—the same price Robert obtained for Jumbo.

More tracks were made by a reporter for Associated Press who came to interview Mathilda about her trip to the Yukon.

"Do you have any advice for women coming to the frozen north?" reporter Jones asked.

"Advice? Certainly. Be prepared to live in a tent surrounded by ice and snow with blizzards so intense you can't see a hand in front of your face. Be prepared to climb glaciers and shoot terrifying rapids. Be prepared for mud and mosquitoes and a sun so hot it'll bake you brown." Mathilda stopped. "I guess it's almost bearable if one is on a honeymoon."

"You're on a honeymoon?" Mr. Jones said, leaning forward with interest. His pencil moved furiously.

"That's what they tell me," Mathilda said with a laugh.

"Hardships of the honeymoon," Jones mused as he prepared to leave. "First-rate material. I believe that'll make a good lead."

"I'm not sure I'm news . . ."

"Oh yes."

Robert returned at the end of the week, drew Mathilda into his embrace and made a request.

"Could we have an early supper? I'd like for us to visit Fred Hart in the hospital. Fred was one of the early pioneers to open the frontier along with Harper, Mayo, and McQuesten."

"If you wish . . ."

St. Mary's Hospital had been open for three weeks. Designed and built by Father William Judge, who

labored with the volunteer workmen and cooked their meals, the hospital was now in charge of the Sisters of St. Anne, assisted by rough miners attempting to be orderlies. Already there were eleven patients.

Mathilda saw the log walls had been coated with sizing and covered with cloth. "I'm impressed," she said. "Each room has a stove, a table, and chair."

In one of the rooms lay the gaunt figure of Fred Hart, a haggard man with cloudy eyes and a beard that looked like moldy hay. "Bob . . ."

"Fred—I brought the missus."

The old man brightened and pushed out a shaking arm. "Pleased to meet you," he said with a feeble rasping voice. "I'm glad . . . you folks came."

"How are you, Fred?"

"Poorly. When this hospital was built, I never figured I'd be the first one to die in it."

"You figure wrong. You're not going to die, Fred. This is just a little setback."

"No. I'm a goner. I'm slated to be"—he coughed—"the first corpse. Mark you . . ."

"No."

"I sure hate being cooped up here."

"It's better than keeling over on the trail—and turning up wolf bait."

A cough rattled in Fred Hart's throat. "I'd rather give out on the trail. There's more dignity in it." He shook his head. "I never thought . . . I'd cash in my chips in a hospital."

"You men," Mathilda scolded gently. "Do you have to be so morbid?"

"Didn't we have some times?" Robert said, taking the cue.

"That we did. Bob, do you remember the miner's meeting in Circle? The woman was in a family way—

we sentenced the man to marry her by five o'clock or else . . ."

"I remember."

"We kept the meeting open . . . to allow him to decide. By five he'd made up his mind to get married. We had some celebration."

"Yah."

"I was just thinking . . . I should have asked that woman to marry me. I'd have something to leave behind." His breathing became irregular. "I don't suppose . . . she would have . . ."

"Maybe she would . . ."

"Crazy idea. Do you suppose . . . I've got cabin fever? Damn hospital!"

"No. It shows you got plenty life in you yet."

The old man forced a smile. "Well, if I die, I'll have plenty of company. Winter isn't over in Dawson. I've seen the omens. Bad things are gonna happen . . ."

"We'd better go," Mathilda prompted.

"Thanks for coming," Fred said weakly. "Come back . . ."

"We will."

On the way out they encountered a gnome of a priest, a gaunt little man with widely spaced eyes set deep within his skull. He stared over the smallest gold rimmed glasses Mathilda had ever seen.

"Father Judge, this is my wife Mathilda."

"Mr."

Robert cut her off. "When I first came up here I was trying to make a fortune so I could get married. Now I'm trying to make a fortune so I can stay married."

Father Judge eyed Mathilda's abdomen. "You've staked quite a bonanza. You've been blessed."

"I'm fortunate . . ."

"You have a fine hospital," Mathilda said.

"We made do with what we had. We didn't have enough. There's so much to be done." His eyes crinkled. "Remember, a fifty-dollar ticket gives you a year of care . . . no matter what. Otherwise it's five dollars a day for room, board, and washing. Five dollars for a doctor's visit."

"We stopped to see Fred Hart. Fred says he's going to be the first to die here. He needs cheering."

"Fred," Father Judge said, moving his head slowly from side to side. "I keep telling him to leave that to God."

Robert raised his hand in farewell.

"Don't forget what I said about a fifty-dollar ticket," Father Judge called after them.

"Would you like to have our baby here?" Robert questioned.

"In a hospital? With all the men?" Mathilda said, her tone incredulous. "Oh no. No!"

"I didn't think so." Robert's mind wandered and he remembered the words of Fred Hart. *He's seen the omens. Bad things are gonna happen. I hope not.*

A swirling snowstorm kept Robert in the cabin on Sunday, hammering and sawing a doghouse for the dog Jessie.

"When are Jessie's pups due?" Mathilda asked.

Robert halted his work, lit his pipe and rubbed his chin. "My guess is—that when our little sourdough arrives he'll already have pups to play with."

"Our little sourdough?" Mathilda questioned, voice

rising slightly. "Well, I like that. He's a sourdough the minute he arrives and I can't seem to make it."

Robert blew a cloud of smoke in her direction and grinned. "You're getting close. When you've made it through an arctic winter in a cabin, come spring you'll almost be a sourdough."

"I'm worried, Rob-bert. People are lined up at the warehouses in lines of sixty and seventy. They've hired doormen to let them in one at a time. Some are tramping back to their claims with less than half an outfit."

"Yah," Robert said, sobering. "Tomorrow I start work at LaDue's sawmill. A regular job. That'll get us some money. I'll buy more supplies."

"It's not the money now. What if there's nothing in the stores to buy?"

"I'll go hunting."

"Look at the snow come down. I think we should bring Jessie in for the night."

The storm lasted well into Monday but Robert set out for the mill early. A glittering blanket of white covered the landscape, obliterating all that was dark and dismal, reminding everyone that a long bleak winter lay ahead. Four thousand minds grappled with a single question. "Will there be enough grub?"

Hungry dogs roamed the streets, breaking into low level caches and unguarded supplies, devouring leather harness, boots, and mittens. A single slash of the carnivorous teeth could rip open a tin can and miners joked with macabre humor that a malemute or husky could go directly to the lone can of tinned meat or fish hidden among six dozen cans of fruits and vegetables. More and more dogs were tethered to cabins and trees where they set up an eerie howl, answered at times by half brothers in the distant hills.

Gold seekers continued to arrive daily, hoping to

On Sunday Robert went to work at the mill and Mathilda assembled kitchen utensils preparatory to baking when Mrs. Wentzel burst in the door. "A boat! A boat!" she cried. "There's a boat coming up the river!"

Mathilda pulled on her jacket and cape and they joined the throng streaming toward the riverfront.

"A boat means there's food coming," a miner said, voicing the thoughts of many.

"There's thousands of people," Mathilda observed. "I've never seen so many."

"Look!" cried a voice in dismay and anguish.

Rounding the bluff came a small birchbark canoe.

A hush settled over the crowd as if all hearts had stopped. No one dared to breathe. Could another boat be following the canoe?

The rush of four thousand breaths exhaled in disappointment. The canoe landed and tall figure leaped out, followed by several Indians.

"Why it's J. E. Hansen of the A-C Company."

His hawkish features purpled from the cold, golden hair matted. Captain Hansen waved his arms to silence the crowd.

"Men of Dawson! Flee for your lives. There will be no riverboats until spring. The water's too low and the boats are all stranded. I've poled three hundred and fifty miles up the river to tell you this—all the way from Fort Yukon. If you don't have enough provisions to make it through the winter I advise you to leave. There's no time to lose."

"Which way shall we go?" a miner shouted.

"The *Hamilton* left some supplies at Ford Yukon. Upriver or down—it's hazardous either way. You have to try. You can't stay here."

Only now did the crowd realize the extent of the disaster. Slowly, as if coming out of a narcotic-induced trance, bodies began to move. An angry mur-

They helped her to her feet and slowly moved past groups of miners making plans.

"I'm leaving," said one. "You wanna buy me out?"

"No," returned his partner. "I'm leaving too."

Father Judge in his threadbare garb stood on a box haranguing the crowd. "Remember the hospital. Bank some of your gold with us and you can bank on the hospital being there when you need it. Emergencies will be treated if you have money or not." He passed a hat for contributions.

"Leaving." Mathilda heard the word everywhere.

In a frenzy men began buying boats and dogs. They traded shares in claims for outfits to take them outside.

Suddenly great multicolor lights began shooting across the sky as if a box of rockets had been ignited.

"The Aurora," Robert said, as he and Mathilda stood in the quiet shadow of their cabin. He placed a comforting arm around her. "There's a lot of green tonight. Sometimes it's more pink . . . or yellow."

"What does it mean?"

"It means," he said slowly, "'Be silent and know that the Lord is God.'"

She felt the warmth of him through the opening in her cape and inclined a worried face.

"We're staying? For sure?"

"Yes. The men poling downstream will get froze in by the time they reach Circle. Upstream—you know what that's like. The best place to be is right here. With me."

"Where you go . . . that's where I'll go."

She felt his arm tightening around her waist.

"No use of me going to work in the morning. We'll get in line at the stores."

The lines were long and at the river men continued to leave in open boats. A straggling fleet of fifty headed downstream. Mathilda purchased few supplies, but Robert obtained a barrel of sugar and five bags of flour. As soon as he'd secured the supplies Robert returned to work at LaDue's sawmill. Late in the afternoon Mathilda wrapped letters she'd written to Dr. Nitzsche, brother John, and friends, along with letters Robert had written to his father and brother Franz, and took them to the Fergussons who were leaving on the little steamer *Kieukik*.

"We're heading upstream to Fort Selkirk," Fergusson said. "From there we're going overland to the Lynn Canal. Tell Mr. Schoenbeck not to worry. We'll be back to work his claim the first thing in the spring."

"I'll tell him. Good luck to you folks."

Fifteen passengers led by Thomas McGee boarded the ailing *Kieukik*. The rickety old boat backed away from shore, challenging a current choked with ice. Her frame shuddered. Old and rotten planks threatened to buckle as the engine coughed and wheezed. With a jerking, unsteady motion the little steamer began to move . . .

Robert worked until seven and came home with news. "From now on I have to be at the mill by six."

"That's a long day. From six until seven."

"Now's the time. Folks are building cabins like crazy. Twelve dollars a day is twelve dollars a day. I stopped and bought some cartridges. If food gets scarce I can always go out and shoot a hare."

"People were sure excited today. The Fergussons left for Pelly on the *Kieukik*. If Mr. Fergusson doesn't come back, you and Mr. McDonald will own a claim."

"He'll be back," Robert said, never realizing his prediction would come true sooner than expected.

"Mrs. Healy stopped in for a minute. She said John sent five men downstream to see what happened to his boats. He's sure people won't starve. He calls Captain Hansen a nervous cheechako."

A short chuckle burst from Robert's throat. "It's unusual that I'd be siding with Healy, but he's absolutely right this time."

"I hear meals around town have gone from a dollar-fifty to two-fifty."

"Yah, and a sack of flour has shot up to a hundred dollars."

"That's insane."

"I didn't want to hear it either," he said helplessly.

Up and stirring before five, Mathilda boiled strong tea to start Robert on his day. The mad exodus of

miners continued and in the turmoil Mrs. Giddings eloped, an incident lost in the excitement except to a close circle of friends. Mrs. Hawkins laughed uproariously despite being ill and Mrs. Crowley's eyes twinkled with amusement.

That evening when Mathilda told Robert about Mrs. Giddings he only managed a feeble grin and she knew the long weary day at the mill had taken its toll. They were in bed by nine.

A few minutes later the shriek of a steamboat whistle cut the night. At once men cheered and Robert leaped out of bed. Mathilda swung her legs over the edge.

"Stay here," Robert said. "I'll get the news. I know you want me to go."

"I'll go too."

"No. It isn't safe on the street. I want you to stay here."

She dropped back to the pillow. "Wake me if I'm asleep. I mean it."

Robert joined the crowd greeting the arrival of the *Portus B. Weare*. Men were in a joyful mood—now there'd be food.

No sooner had the gangplank lowered than John J. Healy strode aboard. "What's your cargo?" he demanded of Captain Eli Weare, son of the company's founder.

"Whiskey and hardware," young Weare said in a firm voice.

Instantly enraged, Healy sprang at him, clutching his throat, fingers tightening.

Weare's face purpled and a muscular man, seeing Weare's life squeezed out of him, jumped forward and separated the pair.

"Damn you," snarled Healy glaring at the stricken Weare. "You bring us hootch—what we need is grub!"

"We did have grub," young Weare choked. "We were robbed at Circle." He clutched his throat and gasped for air. "Fifty miners with guns. They took off thirty tons of grub."

"God damn!" Healy raged. "Damn!"

The night turned cold.

Arriving at the mill early in the morning Robert discovered that steam in the boiler pipes had frozen. The river was choked with cakes of ice.

Her twin black stacks smoking, the *Weare* left at four in the afternoon, jammed to the guards. Hundreds of miners had accepted Healy's offer to travel steerage rate—a flat fee of fifty dollars each to take them to Fort Yukon, eighty-five miles below Circle City.

Where once hungry dogs roamed the streets, now roamed desperate men. Many thefts were reported, many accusations made. In frustration a miner hurled a rock at a circling raven.

You might as well throw at the moon, Robert thought

tons of eatables."

"The same thing happened to the *Weare*."

"It's worse than the old days at Bellevue. I cussed 'em out but what good did it do? There were upwards of fifty of them. I heard one say that boats passed there all summer without stopping."

"Where was Jack McQuesten?"

"Gone. Outside, some say."

"Jack never would have allowed that to happen."

"Most of 'em were stampeders who rushed up here to the Klondike, didn't get a claim, and went back to Circle. There's maybe a hundred and fifty or more rattling around in empty dance halls, empty saloons. It's like a ghost town. They paid for the grub but that don't make it right. Damn pirates!"

A man on shore waved and called, "You got any extra dogs, Bob?"

Robert recognized hard swearing Arthur Walden and returned the freighter's wave. "Not right now."

"Are you folks gonna stick it out here for the winter?" Captain Dixon asked.

"Yah. So should you. You won't make it back to Saint Michaels before the freeze—not with the river this low and full of ice. The Yukon's wicked . . ."

"No," the old skipper objected. "She's beautiful! Mos' beautiful river I was ever on. A man has to listen to her."

On shore Inspector Constantine arranged for miners to leave with a five-day supply of grub and placed the foodstuffs in a large cache. By the time the *Bella* left the next afternoon the cache had disappeared along with forty men who'd been scheduled to leave. Nevertheless hundreds stormed aboard.

The *Bella* backed off and started going round and round.

"There's trouble with the steering gear."

"The rudder's froze."

At length, Captain Dixon managed to straighten the steamer and she dipped and bobbed as she began her northward journey.

With two loads of passengers departed on the *Weare* and *Bella*, fears of famine abated. The crowd frenzy was gone, but soldiers with crossed belts and rifles continued to patrol the streets to prevent looting. Rumors were rampant that thousands of stampededers were on the trail heading for Dawson and many arrived daily. Logs for cabins were in great demand and when Robert came home and told Tillie, "I'm going to work again next Sunday," she replied, "I expected that."

The days warmed and ice floes lessened, but too much ice remained to navigate in safety. A load of beef came in on a raft and experienced difficulty landing. A raft of logs shot downstream between cakes of ice.

Robert purchased a hind quarter of beef on the eleventh. "Two hundred ten dollars. A hundred sixty-eight pounds at a dollar and a quarter per pound!"

"We can sure use it. I bought some lime juice and nuts." Mathilda placed a coal oil lamp on the table and trimmed the wick. "Tonight, when we play cards, we're going to burn a lamp for the first time. So I can watch you better," she teased.

"Hah."

"Hah is right."

A bedraggled couple appeared at the door.

"Fergusson!" Robert exclaimed. "What happened?"

"We came back. The hull of that rotten little tub *Kieukik* got stove in."

"It was terrible," Mrs. Fergusson said, still shaken from the ordeal. "The engine kept quitting. I thought

it was going to blow up."

"It almost floundered when you left," Mathilda said.

"We were a week out and only made thirty-three miles."

"Our guide sat down and cried."

"I couldn't see going overland," Fergusson said. "McGee was losing his grip. Mrs. Fergusson is staying here for the winter. I've decided to pole out."

"I sent your letters ahead with the others," Mrs. Fergusson said. "We were coming back . . . heading in the wrong direction."

"That's fine. I'm glad you're safe."

"It'll be better for your wife to stay in Dawson," Robert agreed.

"That's what I figured," said Fergusson. "I should have plenty company heading out."

Robert nodded grimly.

Daylight hours grew shorter and Mathilda looked forward to the visits of Mrs. Wentzel. "A man was shot for stealing from a cache," she reported.

"Another? I knew one was shot on the spot earlier."

"Mr. Wentzel wants me to thank you for the quinine. He could use a few more. The dipping in the river didn't serve him well."

"Of course." Mathilda reached for the medicine chest.

"I heard Mr. Healy has a few eggs."

"He does? I'll have to get some."

The temperature dropped during the night and the first hard blizzard gathered momentum to strike the brooding town. At dawn flakes were flying like white bees in a bleak gray sky and by the time Mathilda set out for the store she could no longer distinguish the horizon. Opening the door at Healy's, she stamped her feet.

"Mrs. Schoenbeck. Are you alone?" Healy questioned. "In weather like this?"

"Yes. I heard you had eggs."

"Hellfire! It's a blizzard. Not fit for man nor beast."

"It is getting stormy . . ."

"And in your condition." He shook his head.

"Well, I hate to see you come all this way for nothing. I guess I'll give you a few eggs."

She impaled him on a stare.

Healy stroked his goatee. "I know what you're thinking. They're not rotten. My price is high but I guarantee 'em good. There's only a half dozen left . . ."

"Thank you, Mr. Healy."

Even as they spoke the storm intensified. Healy walked her to the door. "Now, wait a minute. Don't just blunder out there. Pick a nearby landmark and walk to it. Then pick another. I don't want you wandering around and falling into the river."

High-fronted buildings formed a dim outline as she made her way along Front Street. Cabins became indistinct. Clutching the sack of eggs in one mittened hand, she pressed the other across her face to keep out cold blinding snow.

She stopped to get her bearings and plunged ahead, gasping for breath. Her foot slipped. She was on a patch of ice!

Probing with her toe she inched ahead. ~~Solid footing~~ It had only been a small patch. A cabin loomed ~~up~~ ahead. She identified the cabin.

~~Not much farther.~~

She blinked against the stinging snowflakes. ~~Don't~~ close your eyes. You'll lose direction.

She made out the faint outline of their cabin. ~~Why~~ was it getting no closer?

Finally, completely exhausted she reached the ~~front~~

door.

"Whew!"

As soon as her strength returned she started baking. Robert smelled the custard pie the moment he arrived but his mind was not on pie.

"After this, stay out of the storm," he growled. His stern look dissolved. "I passed Healy's and he hol-lered at me. 'Keep your wife home in weather like this.' It's good advice."

"If I'd stayed home you wouldn't have a custard pie."

He placed his arm around her. "I love you. That's why I worried . . ."

"It was a little frightening," she admitted.

"I hope so. If you learn to respect a storm early on, you're not so apt to do something foolish. The guys up at Circle used to tell of a lad wandering around in a snowstorm—he lived to be a hundred and still hadn't found his way out."

"Hootch Albert?" Disdain corroded her voice.

"No-o. Black Sullivan." Robert grinned as he placed a piece of kindling on the fire. "I landed a big freighting contract today—Quigley's out on Bonanza. It'll take me at least four trips."

Tuesday's storm halted on Wednesday and resumed with a fury on Thursday. Again the river became clogged with ice. By Saturday the temperature had dipped to thirteen below zero.

"A skiff with three men aboard whizzed past in the river," Mathilda said. "Also a raft of beer. They couldn't make a landing. What's going to happen to them?"

"They'll land somewhere downstream—if they don't panic and upset."

"While you were at work a Mrs. Sheeney called. She's a midwife by profession."

Swinging around corners the dogs frequently jumped out of the traces and pulled at right angles to the sled. Some of the sleds had brakes which were mostly useless and rarely used.

Coming down a steep incline Robert tried to hold back the gee pole by a digging in his feet well forward, holding his shoulders back. Robert knew the position was dangerous—one dog puncher's sled had careened down a steep embankment, crashed into a tree, impaling the driver on the gee pole. For most of the journey Robert abandoned the gee pole in favor of waist high handles at the back of the sled. He urged the dogs forward. "Mush on. Mush on!"

The dogs were unseasoned and he didn't reach home until Wednesday afternoon.

He remained at the cabin a day making needed repairs on the sled and harness and moved out with the second load early Friday. The dogs worked well and as he approached the cabin he checked his watch. They'd shaved a half hour off their previous time.

"Yah dogs."

Mathilda stood at the window watching and waiting. *How I wish I was home in Dubuque. Mama, I wish you were here.* She paused to consider. In recent days everything within her cried out to be home in Dubuque—to be with her mother, to have her mother here. It was connected with her condition, of that she was certain. Early in the pregnancy she'd thought mostly of her father, but at the moment she could think only of her mother, of having her advice, of being with her, of receiving her aid and comfort.

Now she saw Robert and the team coming, growing larger by the second. She flung a cape about her shoulders and stepped out in the cold to meet him.

"Hello." She waved. "Hello."

"Hello." He waved a mittened hand. "I made good time."

She said, "I see you have a new dog."

"Yah. His name's Towser. I paid a hundred dollars for him." Robert raised both hands. "Ah—ah. It's a business expense. I need him." He unhitched the team. "Any news?"

"Mrs. Wentzel went out to their claim on Nineteen Hunker. I sold the first fur cap I made for fifteen dollars. Mrs. Sheeney called again."

"Did you hire her?"

Mathilda debated. "There's still time. Several of the ladies are expecting before I am. I can wait until their bundles of joy have arrived."

"Maybe," Robert said slowly, concern lowering his voice. "Still, the little sourdough may put in an appearance in a terrible hurry. What if I'm on the trail?"

"Don't worry about me," Mathilda said. "Besides . . . didn't you promise me Jessie would have her pups first? And she hasn't."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Robert clucked to the team. "Yah dogs. Ho, Bruno."

Eight hundred ten pounds had been delivered to Joe Quigley and now the dogs loped ahead of the empty sled, moving easily over the frozen crust. Down the bank, the Klondike River flowed sluggishly, a thick layer of ice cakes barely moving.

She'll be frozen soon, Robert thought. *It's getting colder.* He raised a mittened hand and cupped his nose to allay a gentle stinging.

When he reached the cabin he asked Tillie, "What's that Jaeger thermometer say?"

"Sixteen below zero."

"I thought so. I knew it was a little *schnappy*."

"Mrs. Crowley had her baby—a fine boy. Everybody's fine. He arrived at seven o'clock, but not too late for supper." Mathilda smiled.

"That's good news. I'll bet Tim's proud."

"Proud as punch."

"I bought a Siwash dog today—named Slug—for forty dollars. Three hours later I sold him for a hundred."

"That's good news too."

"You haven't heard the best of it. Come . . . sit down. It's payday." Kneeling, he placed two hundred forty-five dollars in fine gold coin in her lap. "From

Joe Quigley and there's more to come. I already have another contract."

"You dear." She kissed his hand.

He rose to his feet. "My next job is delivering two loads to our friend, Fred Hutchinson."

"Mrs. Hawkins and I called on Mrs. Stewart. She's near her time."

"Ray's staying close to home, I suppose?"

"Oh yes."

"Well, the little fellers won't eat much."

Gold coins clinked as Mathilda placed them in a sugar bowl. "I'm not as worried as I was about a food shortage. During the madness you gave me courage. I'm glad I have you."

"And I you." He rubbed his palms. "I'm home for the evening. Would you like to play hearts? Sixty-six? Or cribbage?"

"Yes, if you stop changing the rules." An impish gleam in her eyes gave her face an elfin quality.

His head went back in mock indignation. "When did I ever change the rules?"

"You do all the time."

Ice floes became listless and the river closed on November 7, the same day Mrs. Stewart delivered a son. Robert learned the news when he returned from taking the second load to Fred Hutchinson.

"The second boy born while I was on the trail," he said as he removed his wolf fur-line parka. His brow wrinkled. "I'm worried. I don't like leaving you alone. The same thing could happen to you."

"Don't worry about me. There are neighbors nearby. I've decided to engage Mrs. Sheeney to wait on me. She doesn't know it yet but I intend to tell her."

Robert sagged into a chair. "That takes a load off my mind—having her here to help you."

"There is something you can help me with."

"Now what would that be?"

"Have you noticed the woodpile?" She began to sing her words. "The kindling is dwindling."

Robert hired two men to assist him and their axes thudded into green, now frozen, logs. While they chopped a man came up and told them Fred Hart had passed away.

Robert made a trip on the eleventh but returned from the diggings at noon on the twelfth, in time to attend Fred's funeral.

Afterward he sat staring into the fire, thinking of the past. *What evil omen had Fred Hart seen? What bad things were going to happen?* Forcing the dire prediction from his mind he said, "It was like Fred said. The first to die in the new hospital. It's good to have a hospital, but it's sad that a man can't die the way he wishes . . ."

"We can't control when we're born or when we die."

Robert lit his pipe. "I know. I was thinking about civilization marching north—all the benefits, the humanitarian aspects. Somehow civilization takes the nobility out of the struggle."

"You call freezing to death on the trail noble? I'd rather be in Dubuque."

"There's nothing noble about being in Dubuque."

She sensed the rebelliousness rising within him, like the smoke that curled over his head, a gentle dissipating anger, part of the wolf-restlessness that captivated her from the start. Even now her heart sang. It couldn't possibly be wind whistling through the chinking.

She walked to where he sat and placed an arm around his shoulder. "I understand."

"I wish Jack McQuesten was here," he said over a lump in his throat. "I'm lonesome for Jack. I'd sure

"Yes . . . yes." He half-turned, she had a glimpse of him and felt her heart race, driving color to her cheeks. She'd already placed a kettle on the stove and poured steaming water into a pan. "Put your feet in this," she said avoiding his eyes.

With blankets draped around his shoulders Robert allowed the steam to rise inside the tent. Now she handed him a cup of tea.

"Warm on both ends," he said, smiling.

"And you were worried about me? I'm the one who should be worried about you."

"I'm luckier than Jim Carey," Robert said. "Some no-good robbed his saloon of twenty-two thousand dollars."

"I heard of two men being robbed on the trail."

"It never would have happened in the old days. Not when we had miner's meetings. Did I tell you I bought another Siwash dog? Old Man. I'll use him instead of Jessie. She's heavy with pups."

"I was wondering when you were going to give her a rest."

"You're not getting a rest. You're working right up to the time."

Mathilda smiled. "That's different. I'm not pulling a sled."

"It's no harder for Jessie. It's what she's used to—it's her work. Still, I'm afraid she might have pups on the trail."

Old Man worked well and on the next trip Robert purchased a dog named Rover for seventy dollars.

"He's a big one. I think it's a good investment," he explained, a ready answer for Tillie's raised eyebrow that questioned the expenditure. "In this cold a puncher can expect to lose a dog. I brought you more money—three hundred twelve dollars from the Scotch Boys. Twenty-four forty from A.T. Ellis and

fifty-five dollars and thirty cents from Ed Sullivan."

"I sold another fur cap. Sixteen dollars . . ."

"We're doing well. Tomorrow I leave for Campbell's on Thirty-three Eldorado."

"You certainly have developed a good business."

"We . . ."

The thermometer they'd purchased at Jaeger Hardware in Dubuque registered thirty below zero when Robert mushed off with the team. Remembering Tillie's parting words—"When you get back, I'll have a surprise"—Robert wondered if she expected the little sourdough.

"Go, Bruno. Mush on!"

Powdery snow spewed away from the runners and formed a white cloud. *The little fellow won't arrive while I'm gone. She would have told me.*

He spent a restless night with Campbell and before starting for home Campbell asked, "What day is this?"

Robert thought for a moment. "November eighteenth." *The eighteenth? Why that's Tillie's birthday!*

Could the little sourdough arrive on her birthday?

He pushed the dogs all the way back and after a brief stop at Healy's store, arrived at the cabin at 4 P.M. Mathilda came out to meet him. *She's all right!*

"Hello, darling," she said. "Did you miss me?"

He returned her kiss. "I sure did. I was a little worried. I kept thinking about you."

"I'm glad you're here."

"I hurried back."

"I think we're going to have a birthday."

"I know."

"You know?" Surprise caught her voice. "She's been acting strangely all day. I just know she's going to have her pups."

"Oh, Jessie . . ."

"What did . . . ?"

Yipping and yapping, perplexed, Jessie chased her tail around in front of the cabin.

"She knows something is going to happen to her," Robert observed, "but she doesn't know what."

Jessie stopped, stood with her back arched, straining, emptying her bowels.

"Yes," Robert said. "Any time now."

He unhitched the dogs and tied them. "I don't want them getting in the way."

Jessie's belly convulsed in waves. She stood stiff-legged, eyes watering, saliva dripping from her mouth, straining to straighten the birth canal. Suddenly, out popped a bladderlike sack, now the nose of a sleeping puppy. Jessie sucked in a breath, humped her back and the puppy dropped. She spun around and licked the tiny nose open, breathing life into the mouth, inflating the lungs that barely labored. She lapped slime from the mewling furred puff.

"Right out here on the snow," Mathilda said.

"Nature's way. Come, let's take her inside. Better let me take the pup."

He picked up the pup carefully, alert for any sign of attack. "C'mon, girl . . . into the cabin."

Jessie's hind legs spread wide, bringing her tail close to the cabin floor. A spasm, and the second pup appeared. She dried it with her tongue.

Fatigue wore at her and she flopped on her side. Now a gentle ripple along her ribs brought forth the third puppy. After a time, the fourth, the fifth . . .

"Six," Robert said. "How many is she going to have?"

"Seven," Mathilda said at length.

Mathilda inclined a happy face toward Robert, eyes

with wonder, not seeing the somber expression lurked in his eyes. "Isn't it wonderful?" she led.

"Yeah," he said dully.

"She slurped down the placenta."

"ugh," Mathilda said, revulsed. "I didn't know she did that."

"Nourishment," Robert said. "It's nature's way—it gets down the milk." His eyes clouded, furrows lined his brow. "I don't think she'll have milk enough to feed seven."

"How'll we feed them?"

"We can't." His mouth set in a grim slash. Without enough milk the pups would perish one by one—unless he intervened with drastic measures. He might have to kill some of them. His heart sank and he could not bring himself to tell Tillie about the terrible deed that consumed his thoughts. *I can't tell her. Not in her delicate condition.* The specter hung over his thoughts and he was glad Tillie hovered over the stove preparing supper.

"Fred Hutchingson was down while you were gone," she said. "He told me they found a man's arm frozen in the ice. Just the arm . . . nothing else. No body."

"That's the way it is."

"I received a letter dated August third—from Amanda Hunting in Juneau. We went out to Douglas Island and looked at the mine while you and the McGraths were looking for dogs."

"Hm"

tion of pictures. Local scenes. I bought six. Something to show Poppa."

"All right."

"This being an occasion I thought we should celebrate," she said somewhat peevishly, studying Robert for a reaction. *He's forgotten my birthday!* "I have a nice moose stew, onions, Julienne potatoes, a marble cake—and a surprise."

"A surprise?"

"Yes, a surprise!" Her words had a biting quality and petulance pushed out her lower lip.

The anger in her tone did not escape him—he saw she'd become sullen. "You're certainly getting a lot of surprises on your birthday," he said matter-of-factly.

"You know," she exclaimed, voice soaring. "You remembered!"

He flashed a grin. "Of course. How could I not remember?" He went to where he'd hidden a bottle under his coat. "It isn't wrapped fancy, but . . ."

"You remembered!" Her face glowed.

He held up the whiskey. "It's good stuff—the best Healy had. I wouldn't forget my honey's birthday."

"I thought you had."

"So I noticed."

"Well . . ." She placed her hands on her hips. "Whiskey."

"Is it all right? I thought you'd enjoy a quiet drink—it'll come in handy when the little sourdough arrives—and I couldn't think what else—"

"It's a fine gift. Thank you ever so . . ." Her arms went out and he drew her close.

"Happy birthday. I hope you're happy here in the Yukon. I know it's been a terrible ordeal for you."

"It's certainly been an adventure." Her mind blurred, as if focusing on something remembered from a girlhood dream. She marveled at how attrac-

tive he was. How could he know the happiness within her, what marriage to him had meant? She wanted his child and very soon she'd give him the little sourdough for which he longed. *Oh God, I want to spend the rest of my life with him . . . and have him belong to me.* He handed her the bottle. "Let's have a drink right now," she said, going for two glasses.

"Here's to you," he said.

"The same to you." She tried to wink, a gesture accomplished with difficulty. In order to close one eye she had to lift the corner of her mouth and screw up her face.

The exaggerated effort amused him.

The glasses clinked above their laughter.

"If Poppa could see me now."

"He'd approve."

"Are you sure?"

"Sure."

When he sat down for supper she cautioned, "Now I don't want you to eat too much marble cake. I still have a surprise. Another dessert. The one you liked in Dubuque. Floating islands."

"Up here?"

"Of course. It's my birthday."

The weather turned colder and Robert delayed taking the next load to Campbell. Instead, he toured the town and returned with a quarter of moose acquired for one hundred fifty dollars. In the morning a forty below temperature caused him to stay in the cabin. Later on, in the dead of winter, he knew he'd be glad to see the temperature warm to forty below.

He checked Jessie's pups and as suspected, they'd made little progress. *They're starving.* The terrible deed had to be done—there were no alternatives—no pleasant way he could tell Tillie. No way he could keep it from her.

He glanced to where Tillie sat sewing. *Now's the time.* Moistening dry lips, he began. "Having seven pups can be considered a blessing—like a man dying of thirst would think water is a blessing. But if he was suddenly pitched into White Horse Rapids he wouldn't think that was much of a blessing."

"Yes . . ." she answered tentatively, wondering where he was heading.

"Jessie was too well blessed," Robert said, his mind filled with a terrible foreboding. *Dirty deed.* "She doesn't have enough milk." His throat closed.

Riddled with guilt, he forced himself into a forbidden territory, into an alien land where he was violating the faith Tillie placed in him. He swallowed, his voice sounding hollow. "There's nothing else for it. I'll have to kill some of the pups."

"No!" The cry escaped her throat and at once she wished she could recall it. Mathilda stared at him, feeling the pain that surged up from his depths. He was anguishing how she'd feel because she was expecting . . . because of the baby. "Well, they're only dogs," she heard herself say in a voice that sounded foreign.

"I knew you'd be upset," he said, unable to conceal the relief that suffused his face. "You can pick if you want to."

"No," she said, looking away. "You do what has to be done. I don't want any part of it."

The smallest pup had been unable to stake a claim to a nipple since birth. He selected three more of the weakest, went out and quickly killed them.

He couldn't maintain the silence—he had to talk—to justify what he'd done. "With seven nursing, none of them would get enough milk to survive. By the time the weakest one starved, one by one, the others would have been too emaciated to make it. This way,

"You certainly are a good provider."

"When I've paid for it. Any other news?"

"Mrs. Crowley went to the gulch. Mr. Wentzel came down from Hunker. I sold three boxes of cigars to Fred Hutchinson's partner for seventy-five dollars."

"I sold Old Man for a hundred twenty-five—a profit of seventy-five dollars. But I bought another dog for ninety-five."

"I have some bad news," Tillie said.

"Huh?" His head jerked. "What?"

"Two of Jessie's pups died."

"Oh."

"Dr. LeBlanc told me Mrs. Rudolph's baby was born dead. I knew something was wrong when she fainted at the riverfront."

"That's a hard knock for the Rudolphs." Robert sat down and stared into the fire, remembering old miners' tales, stories of bad luck omens. The next morning before he started on a trip to Skookum Gulch he found the last of Jessie's pups frozen.

Thrusting thoughts of evil omens aside, he urged the dogs forward. "Mush on."

It was almost 8 P.M. before he returned and saw Tillie's light in the cabin window. He unhitched the dogs and hurried inside.

"Boy," he said, out of breath. "Thirty-five miles in one day. We made good time."

"You sure did," Tillie said.

"I was glad to see the light."

"Days are getting short. It was so dark I had to light the lamp at three o'clock this afternoon. That's something to write home about."

Early in the morning on November 24, terror-stricken cries aroused the town.

"Fire! Fire! The Opera House is on fire!"

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Robert whirled. "Harry. I thought I recognized your voice."

Harry Ash nodded. "Bob."

"She took the wool yarn and knit sweaters, made petticoats and sold them . . ."

"Lucky there's no wind," Harry Ash said. "The whole town would go."

Robert refused to leave with the dogs, checking the wind, keeping a watchful eye on the charred ruins. Later that evening he took a walk and found Pete McDonald poking in the smoldering ashes of his burned out M&N Saloon and Dancehall.

"Did anyone ever figure how it started?" Robert asked.

"We know how it started," McDonald said bitterly. "It was that damn Belle Mitchell. She threw a kerosene lamp at somebody in a fit of temper. I'd like to strangle the bitch. Burned out half of Front Street."

"What are you gonna do, Pete?"

"Rebuild. What else can I do? I'll have a new place thrown up here inside of a week."

Robert nodded agreeably. A man who could bring a horse over the Chilkoot could certainly rebuild a saloon.

McDonald lowered his voice. "Hell, Bob, I was taking in thirty-six hundred dollars a day. I have to rebuild."

"Hey, Pete," called a young man. "I hear you're gonna rebuild. You wanna buy some whiskey glasses? I've got some for five and six dollars apiece."

"I'll be damned," Pete growled. "While the place burned, sharpies were already buying up every loose whiskey glass in town." He shouted at the young man. "The hell with that. I'll make my own out of copper and tin." He turned to Robert, muttering. "This is a helluva way to start Thanksgiving."

Lucky it's cold. Otherwise I would have left yesterday. I'd have been on the trail. Tillie would have been alone. Who would she have called in the middle of the night?

Hurrying up the path to the cabin Robert heard a scream, looked behind him and saw Mrs. Sheeney had disappeared. She'd stepped off the compacted snow of the path and now wallowed in loose snow up to her armpits.

"Help me out."

He pulled her out of the snowbank and brushed off her clothes while she stamped her feet and muttered. They quickly entered the cabin and closed the door.

"Not yet," Dr. LeBlanc said. "Her cramps have slowed."

They sat around the fire drinking tea and at four o'clock Dr. LeBlanc said, "Nothing's happening. I'm going home and get some sleep."

"We'll call you," said Mrs. Sheeney.

Robert saw the doctor out, struck a match and read the thermometer. "Fifty-five below zero."

"Coldest day so far," Mrs. Sheeney said.

After a while Mathilda's cramps resumed. She appeared feverish and in a great deal of misery.

"Run for the doctor," Mrs. Sheeney called, waving her arms. "It's time."

Dr. LeBlanc returned at once and had no sooner entered the cabin than the dogs set up a great commotion, barking and yapping. Robert heard a ferocious snarl and a throaty growl.

Running out, he saw Rover lunge at Bruno. Thrown back, Bruno rolled, instantly regaining a footing and charged, teeth closing over Rover's neck, ripping off fur. Now they rolled in the snow, snarling, biting at legs, ears, whatever part of the adversary their fangs could reach. Up on their hind legs in mouth to mouth combat, oblivious to Robert's yelling, they continued

... till I'm able."

He nodded, patting her arm. "Consider it done."

While she slept he made the entry for the previous day and continued with the current day, telling how he'd gone to get Dr. LeBlanc. "Tillie very well and happy. The little fellow measured 20 inches . . ."

Dr. LeBlanc stopped in twice during the day and Mrs. Wentzel and friends called.

"Robert Schoenbeck, Junior," Mrs. Wentzel said.

"Perhaps," Tillie said.

Robert spoke up. "No. We'll name him after your father. Robert Frederick Schoenbeck. So it shall be."

"If you wish."

Mrs. Sheeney kept up the fire all night and cooked breakfast. The baby cried most of the time, shrieking at the top of its lungs.

"He's hungry," Mrs. Sheeney said, looking worried. "That's why he's crying. She doesn't have any milk."

"None?"

"Almost none."

Robert felt joy draining from his heart. "The little fellow can't live without milk."

Mrs. Sheeney nodded, her face drawn.

"I'll get some beer," he said. "I'll try to get her some beer."

Bartenders stared at him and silently shook their heads. He tried the A-C store.

"Jack McQuesten would have some beer."

Invoking the name of Jack McQuesten had been the key. That's the way he told it when he arrived home with an entire case. "Fifteen dollars. I also bought a tin of coal oil. Now you can burn the lamp all you wish."

Mathilda sat up, drank beer and joked. "I can't complain about the remedy. Still I'm glad the after-birth was destroyed."

I know you'd miss them."

"I gave Mrs. Sheeney a hundred dollars, Dr. LeBlanc a hundred ten." He broke into a grin. "The little sourdough's ours!"

"I must say Mrs. Sheeney worked ten times as hard. She was here fourteen hours a day. We could have done it without a doctor—she and I."

"I thought you liked doctors."

"I'm not talking about doctors," she said quietly. "At all."

On Christmas Day Robert donned his wedding suit and overcoat and walked to St. Paul's church. In a short time he returned. "No church today. Can you imagine that? I thought Anglicans were religious."

"Well, have some lunch."

"Ah, strawberry jelly." Robert licked his lips.

"A gift from Mrs. John Healy. The cocoa too. Gifts for baby Robert."

Robert chuckled. "I hope he enjoys them."

"Christmas," Mathilda sighed, loneliness etching her voice. "At noon I saw the shadow of the sun shining on the hills. Having to light the lamp at three in the afternoon—it's rather depressing."

"We're lucky to have coal oil. In the old days we didn't."

"I know," she said, anticipating his words.

"We sat in cold dark cabins, inhaling the fragrance of sourdough in a pot over a sheet-iron stove and by spring we all smelled worse."

Robert hired dog puncher P. M. Roblin and sent him with a combination to load to Thirty-five and Thirty-seven on Eldorado. On December 29 Roblin left with a load for Hunker.

Two nights later Robert stood at the window, peering into the darkness. "Where is that man? He should have been back long ago."

the Northern Lights—it would have been nice."

He found the idea amusing and laughed. "That's not the way it works. Oh, it could . . ."

"I'm a little disappointed, but the night won't be a total loss. I made a dessert you like. Floating islands."

"No night I spend with you would be a loss. With floating islands it'll be a positive delight."

"When I came in you looked worried."

He nodded. "Roblin. The new contract. I was wondering what the new year will bring. Eighteen ninety-eight. Here we sit, froze in . . . in a tiny speck of the world. Dawson City—a place that nobody has ever heard of—except stampeders."

"We're a family and we've saving money. There's gold here. We have several claims. One might prove to be a bonanza."

"Do you suppose . . . ?"

Others shared their dreams. Beyond snowcapped mountains and frozen streams the arrival of the gold ship *Portland* in Seattle and the *Excelsior* in San Francisco the previous July had sparked a frenzy unrivaled in the nation's history. Workers and shopkeepers abandoned their posts. In some towns all elected officials resigned, each with a single compelling purpose. *Get to the Klondike. Strike it rich. Get some gold!*

For every thousand men who had already arrived in Dawson, tens of thousands in lock step now lined the trail, battling their way up the face of the implacable and awesome Chilcoot, in the midst of a cold and terrible winter.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Every day at noon Mathilda went to the window hoping to capture a few fleeting rays of sunlight but she saw only the subdued reflection of the sun on the snowy crests of distant hills. Modeled in high relief by shadows, the steep-ravined hills held none of the picturesque qualities of hills in northeast Iowa.

At least the sun shone there. Here many days passed when not even the hilltops were aware of the sun's presence.

I wish I was home.

In Dubuque the chill that crept into a house overnight dissipated with the cooking of breakfast. Here in Dawson the chill never left, especially if one moved near a wall. It wasn't only frigid arctic air sneaking through the chinking. She heard Robert enter and felt a cold blast on her back.

"Robert. You're home!"

"Ummm. Smells good," he said.

The aroma of cooking beef filled the cabin, a portion of the 500 pounds of flour and 200 pounds of tallow Captain Hansen had provided for the dogs—part of the freighting contract.

Robert shucked off his coat, approached the steaming kettle, and speared a crackling ^{like a piece of}

frame and peered out a crack in the door, quickly closing it. "It's snowing and blowing. Are you sure it's worthwhile traveling all the way to Forty-Mile to see your lady friend?"

Mathilda sucked in a breath. "How could you ask such a question?" A soft laugh took the sharpness off her words. Last Friday, after Reverend Bowen left, Robert confided to Frank that the minister was sweet on a school teacher in Forty-Mile. Now she wished Robert hadn't mentioned it.

"I hear you're partial to school teachers," Frank Kellersman teased. "Well, it's a long mush over there."

"I went all the way to Dubuque for my bride," Robert said. "In comparison, Forty-Mile hardly seems an effort."

A good-natured grin covered Reverend Bowen's fleeting embarrassment. "She's really a wonderful person. I intend to bring her here as soon as she can leave the school."

"A school teacher," mused the Gold Commissioner. "Splendid. We can use a school teacher here in Dawson."

"He hasn't won her yet," Frank went on.

Reverend Bowen stared at him reprovingly. "Aside from being a doubting Thomas there's a bit of the Old Nick in you. I suspect we'll have much to talk about on the trail."

"You won't do much talking," said Commissioner Fawcett. "Not in this cold."

"During rest stops . . ."

Frank turned to Robert and deadpanned. "On a short run like Forty-Mile, you don't stop and rest the dogs, do you?"

Robert beamed. "That's up to you." He saw Reverend Bowen edging toward the table.

On Wednesday, with the wall completed, Robert went to purchase lumber for shelving.

"It's all over town," he exclaimed when he returned and carried the boards inside. "Jesson shot his wife. They say it was an accident."

Shocked, Tillie's hand flew to her mouth. "Shot? Dead?"

"Dead."

Her hand dropped. "That poor woman. How can they say it was an accident? He's a terrible man. Don't you remember his awful temper?"

"How could I forget? Snow-blind, staring down his gun barrel—there's going to be an inquest."

"You'll have to go."

"Don't worry. I wouldn't miss it."

The inquest began on Thursday and when Robert returned Mrs. Hawkins and Mrs. Stewart were visiting Tillie.

"What happened?" Mrs. Stewart asked.

"No news yet," Robert said. "They didn't finish the inquest. It goes on tomorrow."

Mr. Hawkins sniffed. "Hell, they ought to hang him."

"Maybe they will. But there isn't much evidence. Only a suspicion. Who can tell what went on in the Jesson cabin?"

"Just the same . . ."

"I see you're going back into the store business," Mrs. Stewart said.

"In a small way. I still have a bunch of cigars."

Robert finished putting in the shelves and returned to the inquest. He came home as soon as Inspector Constantine announced the decision.

"They found Jesson not guilty."

"What?" Tillie's hands moved to her hips in an indignant pose. "How could they?"



chance he might become a storekeeper when they returned to Dubuque.

"I've been selling sugar for a dollar a pound," Robert said. "Isn't that outrageous?"

"It's the prevailing price."

"But still outrageous."

A few men continued to arrive, walking in over the frozen river, bringing news of the trail. As the days of January waned, the temperature plunged to seventy degrees below zero and daylight hours were limited from nine to four.

Robert carried in seven boxes of candles he'd purchased for thirty dollars a box and put them on display. Within two days all had been sold for thirty-five dollars a box.

"It's not much of a profit," Mathilda said. "Not if you consider overhead—the cost of building shelves, the heat, a candle now and then, my salary . . ."

Robert shook his head. How could there be overhead when the expenses of which she spoke would normally be attributed to maintaining their home? There was no use getting into an argument over business philosophy, he concluded. Tillie already managed the money. What did it matter?

By the end of the week the temperature warmed to fifty below zero and Mathilda spent the eighth day of February struggling with the laundry, starting early in the day, hanging up long-handled underwear and bedclothes on lines strung from one wall to the other. Garments hung in the cold corners of the cabin froze before they dried. The stove glowed like a cherry and baby Robert, snug in his hammock, swung at a safe distance.

Mathilda prepared an anniversary supper—roast beef, potatoes, beets, tomatoes, and mincemeat. Had they really been married a whole year? It didn't seem

—some of the boys wanted to buy him drinks. 'No sir,' Jack said. 'I still have seven hundred miles to go.' He's going on to Dyea."

"He didn't join the celebration in his honor?"

"No. Only a cheechako would drink in cold weather. Whiskey thins the blood—a man freezes enough the way it is. Jack's a veteran dog puncher."

"And a champion. My, you certainly brought me exciting news. I'll put it in the diary."

"It isn't all good. There's ten thousand tons of grub stacked up at Saint Michaels. Still . . . that bodes well for the future. As soon as the river thaws we'll have something to eat. The panic's subsided. The price on a sack of flour is down to fifty dollars."

"Hah!" Her voice rose in a cheer. "Fifty dollars! That's what I sold a sack for . . . to Tim Crowley. I'm proud of myself."

"I'm proud of you too."

For several days the thermometer stuck on minus fifty-five and the day Roblin returned from Forty-Mile it dipped to minus sixty-two. Despite the cold, Mrs. Bill Huson called and reported she'd sold Tillie's challis dress, beaded cape, collar, and silk waist.

"Forty-three dollars is forty-three dollars," Tillie told Robert.

"It's true you didn't wear them," he said, trying to decide if he should tell her he'd spent more than forty-three dollars on a claim. "I saw Mrs. Sheeney heading this way—did she stop in?"

"Yes. We had a nice visit and weighed the baby. He weighs thirteen pounds. The dear. He's doing so well. Mrs. Sheeney told me she staked a sidehill claim out on Bonanza."

"Why not? Now's the time to buy—before all the people on the trail rush in. I bought plug tobacco and smoking tobacco from a man named Mosher. I met a

"Lots aren't claims. And there's another thing wrong with your analysis. You're assuming the newcomers are rich. If they're shopkeepers, shoe clerks, and city officials, they won't be able to pay outrageous prices."

"I've seen it happen before." His words had an empty ring in the stillness of the crisp arctic night.

Robert's palms came up again. "I let Roblin go when I sold the dogs so we needn't pay him anymore. Frank's taking another load to Forty-Mile. There's a profit. Don't worry."

"I do worry."

"I know. Just think of the profits we'll make when the cheechakos arrive. Any day now."

Mouth tense, Mathilda turned away. Stung by a second wave of anger, she spun around and flung sharp words at him. "I hope you start selling pretty soon. I'm going back to Dubuque!"

Robert shrugged and muttered under his breath. "I'll sell all right. Wait and see. I'll sell."

Mathilda did not remain angry long—months ago she'd vowed never to end a day estranged from her husband. It was much better to cuddle in the warmth, strength and comfort of his arms . . .

Sunday broke mild and full of sun.

"It's such a lovely spring day," Mathilda observed after they'd had dinner.

Robert slid back his chair. "How'd the two of you like to go for a ride?"

Tillie's voice soared. "Could we? That would be wonderful."

"Sure."

She bundled the baby in furs, Robert hitched five dogs to the sled and they started down the hill. At the bottom a photographer waved them to a halt. "Hold very still," he said and snapped their picture.

"Thank you," Robert said. "We're out for a drive."

The photographer nodded. "That's a good name for it. Out for a drive. Yes."

A miner called to Robert. "Bob. There's twenty-two sacks of mail down at Jim Carey's."

Robert headed the dogs toward the saloon and learned the mail would not be available until

Monday.

"Did you hear? There's been a battle with Spain."

"A battle? Are we at war?"

"I guess so."

"It's a good thing we're here in the Yukon," Robert said. His eyes clouded as he remembered the German cavalry. "We don't want any part of that."

"Oh, look," Mathilda exclaimed the next day when they obtained the mail. "Here's a letter from Wiesbaden, Germany, from an Ernst Schierenberg, thanking me for the description of my trip. He read it in the *Saint Louis Westliche Post*. Imagine!"

She opened another. "Here's one from United News in New York. 'Your descriptions of life in the Yukon are receiving worldwide attention . . .'"

"You're practically famous," Robert said. "That'll teach you to talk to reporters."

"I sort of like it," Mathilda admitted. "Well, famous or not, I'm going to enjoy this day. It's nice again. I'm going to give little Robert a ride. He took yesterday's outing so well. The snow won't last much longer."

Robert watched her hitch Bruno to the tiny cutter made by Fred Hutchinson, heard her yell, "Mush," and the lead dog started down the hill at a brisk pace. His chest swelled with pride and he said aloud, "Now there's a picture!"

With supplies no longer available from Forty-Mile, stock in the Schoenbeck store dwindled and they closed the business April 19.

"Things are starting to move," Robert told Tillie when he returned from a tour of the town. "A man named Fuller paid eighteen thousand for some lots and Pat Galvan bought the Jones property for thirty thousand."

"Mr. Galvan certainly is a spender. That's the

second parcel he's purchased. Maybe you could sell him a claim."

"I'll try. They say he's worth millions. He'd have the money."

"It's time we sold . . ."

"I did sell some dogs. Ben went for a hundred. Bingo, Rover, and Cleveland for seventy-five each. When Frank gets back from Skookum Gulch I doubt if we'll have another job."

From time to time Robert peered out the window. Presently he saw Frank Kellersman running behind a rapidly approaching team and went out to meet him.

"We've been hoodwinked! We've been swindled!" Frank shouted, voice blazing in anger. "I made a side trip to All Gold. Our claim was salted. The varmint fired shotgun shells loaded with dust into the claim to make it look good."

"He salted the claim?" Robert reeled. "Why that no good—" Sudden fury engulfed him. *Worthless?*

"I came back as fast as I could. What are we going to do?"

"Get our money back," Robert said, raising a clenched fist.

"How?"

"Leave it to me. He's up on Bonanza. I'll go there first thing in the morning."

"Yeah." Frank's massive hands came up and he pretended to squeeze a man's neck in a vice. "We'll get our money back or else."

"No need for you to come along," Robert said. Some of his runaway anger replaced by reason. "I can take care of him myself."

Inside the cabin, Mathilda heard Frank's shouted report of disaster. Immediately incensed, she caught anger and tears, the heartbreak of that disaster. She

saw Robert drive a punishing fist into his palm and managed not to scold him—he was doing that to himself.

"I shouldn't have bought it," he said over and over.

She felt him tossing during the night and when he left on his mission in the morning, a faint look of determination on his lips, she said, "Do your best. I'll be waiting for you."

On his return she saw a lean hangdog look and knew he hadn't been successful.

"How do you get blood out of a turnip?" Robert croaked. "The man went out on a spree . . . spent the money on high living and loose women. He was still half drunk when I found him."

Mathilda's sensitive face became a mask of anguish. "Oh, I'm so sorry." She sighed heavily. "So nothing can be done. All our hopes shattered. It sounded too good from the beginning. That was certainly a danger sign. All right, no more buying." She reached out and touched his arm. "We have to go on."

Robert shrugged. "That's all we can do. In the old days a man could buy a claim sight unseen. You could take a man's word. If it wasn't right he'd make it good."

"I told you most of the men around here look like they've been kicked out of the Dubuque jail."

"We still have the claim," Robert said hopefully. "The Lucky Swede found gold when he was swindled. Maybe the same thing will happen to us. If we dig down . . ."

"I don't feel lucky. I feel miserable—so terribly hurt."

He faced her solemnly. "Are you mad at me?"

"I was at first. Then I realized it wasn't your fault. I could see how it upset you—and Frank. You were angry enough at yourself for both of us. But there's a

lesson to be learned from this. Now we need money to get home on."

He bobbed his head. "Yes."

"I can hardly wait. Spring is here. Then it's summer and home."

"Yah, I guess . . ." His voice sounded tentative. At the moment he felt no joy at the prospect. In a vague and mysterious way he knew going home meant gold was slipping out of his grasp. "I really don't want to leave," he blurted. "I really don't."

He went out to walk off his frustration.

In the Yukon, spring began with the breaking of the river's ice. Slowly as runoff from the hills found cracks and crevices in the rotting ice, pressure began to mount above and below the surface. As the pressure kept building, ice a couple yards thick rose in the center of the stream and water raced in channels along shore, wearing through the slushy surface until the entire mass began to crack and heave. Suddenly breaking free with the roar of a freight train, icebergs larger than boxcars began tumbling in the raging current, ripping and grinding, reducing floating logs to kindling, providing an awesome spectacle that everyone came to see.

The river had risen to within a foot of the rim and Inspector Constantine nervously paced the shore, worried that the town would be swept away.

The Klondike broke May 4 and within twenty-four hours the rising current ripped out the upper bridge. A twenty-foot open spot appeared in the Yukon but a sheet of ice remained attached to the opposite shore until Sunday, May 8, at four in the morning. Unaware the river had opened until she awakened, Tillie saw hunks of ice larger than cabins rolling end over end in a mad race to the north.

For several days ice cakes rushed downstream and

mud. The ooze pulled wagons down to their axles and coated the bellies of floundering horses.

The rain continued and many rafts were lost in the flood. As May surged into June, the river crested and held steady for twenty-four hours.

Out at the diggings thousands of miners washed mud and silt along miles of sluice boxes, trapping record amounts of gold. Commissioner J. W. Walsh's announcement that the twenty percent tax was reduced to ten percent on any mine producing more than five hundred dollars per week placated neither American nor Canadian miners.

"When they heard Walsh's news," Robert reported, "it didn't soothe the boys one bit. 'By God,' one man roared. 'This mine ain't ever going to produce over five thousand per year.' The boys aren't going to report what they find. They're gonna sneak into town and spend it."

"I don't suppose they'll get caught," Tillie said.

Robert spread his palms. "By whom? Inspector Constantine's still worried the town will swim away. He's got his hands full with cheechakos."

when the sun glistened on blue ice. But one look's enough!"

Fergusson nodded. "On the trail I told the boys, 'I bought a claim from Big Alex McDonald and Bob Schoenbeck.' It was enough to keep me going. They envied me."

"I hope the claim is good."

"Not half as much 'as I do."

The Fergussons said good-bye, and Robert and Mathilda watched them sloshing through the mud in the direction of the claim.

"Alone all winter," Tillie said, turning to Robert. "I hope they make it."

With boats coming down from Lake Bennett, expectations rose that a steamer would come upstream from distant St. Michael.

"The boys are betting it's the *Bella* or the *Weare*," Robert said, "the last boats to leave before the freeze. I put a dollar on Cap Dixon. I think he'll bring the *Bella* through. Some are betting thousands . . ."

"Well, don't you," Tillie said firmly.

"The dollar was my own money."

"All right. I guess you need some fun."

On June 8, the cry "Steamboat coming!" attracted thousands to the waterfront. Folks soon realized the growing speck on the Yukon was too small to be either the *Bella* or the *Weare*.

"Why it's the little *May West*."

"You got any whiskey on board?" a miner called as the boat landed.

"Sure do."

Within an hour sixteen barrels were hauled ashore and drinks moved across various bars for a dollar each, accompanied by shouts and cheers of boisterous men and the random firing of rifles and pistols.

"We passed four boats high and dry," reported the

"Yah . . ."

"Some day I'm going to settle down like you, Bob. Get me a wife . . ." Fritz gazed at Tillie. "If you ever get tired of him—or he doesn't treat you right—"

"No danger of that," Mathilda said. She moved to where Robert sat and draped a slender arm around his shoulder.

"I thought not." Fritz grinned. "If I was to bet, you'd be the last couple I'd figure for a split."

"Yah," Robert said. "We're hitched to stay."

"Going back to Dubuque?"

"At the end of summer." Robert shifted uneasily. "I've been trying to sell my property . . . for cash. Not doing too well."

"Give the men a chance to work. By the end of summer they'll have a stake. You'll be able to sell."

"If they have a stake they'd be darn fools to stay around for winter," Tillie said sharply.

Fritz and Robert glanced at each other knowingly.

"She has a point there, Bob. It's no good selling to a greenhorn. They don't know one end of a shovel from another."

"We have to sell," Tillie insisted.

"I just remembered," Fritz said. "Dr. Nitzsche said tell Bob his friend Herman Kirmse sold his jewelry store in Dakota last summer and headed for Alaska."

"What?" Robert's incredulous look altered to one of amusement. "He finally did it? Just when it's time for me to go home." He threw back his head and roared with laughter. "Can you beat that?"

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Stampeders knew that Discovery had been staked but the urge to be first at something—anything—captivated them and spilled over into every aspect of life. Notoriety and acclaim went to the first to bring in an orange, a horse, a piano, or a bicycle. In the winter of '97-'98 rival printing presses raced for Dawson in boats. Fearing the race might end in a dead heat, a beady-eyed man named Gene Allen abandoned the boat and came across the ice on a dog sled. His *Klondike Nugget*, a single page bulletin circulated almost two weeks before the full-sized June 11 edition of the *Yukon Midnight Sun*. Volume One, Number One, of the *Klondike Nugget* came out dated Thursday, June 16 and ever after each editor claimed to have been first.

An instant success, the newspapers broadened horizons for sourdoughs and cheechakos alike, and thirsting for news, Robert and Mathilda became avid readers of the *Nugget*.

"Since Saint Mary's Hospital opened, two hundred seventy-five patients have been treated and only twenty-five have died."

"Did you see that Calamity Jane is in town?"

"A wild shot by David Cone, fireman on the *Hamilton*, went through the window of the Poplar

Tempers flared over the appropriation of water and men bickered about boundaries. The sidehills were alive with men working bench claims.

"Miners," Robert scoffed. "They're not miners. All these boys want is enough money to get outside."

If a man left, three cheechakos sprang forward to take his place.

Returning to Dawson, Robert studied the men, unable to come to grips with the sheer numbers that had poured into the region. Ragged black-clad stampedeers trudged along Dawson streets, their heads down, demoralized and disgusted, wearing blank stares and expressions of dejection. Milling about by the thousands, friends sometimes passed a yard from each other without recognition and, when separated, a brother could spend hours seeking a brother. The more intrepid posted notices in predetermined places stating where they could be found.

Robert would have missed his old friend had they not come upon each other nose to nose.

"Jack McQuesten!"

"Bob Schoenbeck! As I live and breathe!" McQuesten's florid features cracked into a grin and he pumped Robert's hand. "I thought you'd be married and settled down in Dubuque." He hesitated and his chin went out. "Or didn't she wait?"

"She waited all right," Robert said, beaming. "I brought her up here with me. We got us a little sourdough—arrived last November—already big enough to ride a wolf."

"Man, this is too good to be true. C'mon. Let's have a drink for old times sake." McQuesten led the way to the Aurora Saloon.

"I heard you'd left Circle and gone outside."

"San Francisco."

"How's Kate?"

"This missus is fine. Just fine. She takes to big city living like a duck to water."

"It's sure good to see you, Jack."

"Same here. I had to come back . . . to settle accounts . . . get some off the books. Were you in on the big stampede?"

"No. I didn't get back till last June. I bought a few claims, spent the winter freighting, and ran a store for a while."

"You always thought a store was a gold mine." McQuesten chuckled. "Maybe now you know it ain't. Man, what a strike—it makes the one we had at Circle look sick. I tell you, Bob, some have struck it rich. They reach into their pockets, bring out a sack of nuggets and say, 'Here, Jack. This'll cover what I owe you.' The boys are paying off if they've got it." His voice dropped. "Of course, some I'll never get."

"Circle," Robert reflected. "That was some show. Paris of the Yukon. I hear there's nothing but a bunch of toughs and owlhooters hanging out there now."

McQuesten's face became drawn. "It was bad, real bad. One minute we were busy as bees, then news of the Klondike hit and men swarmed up here—the hive was empty, the honey gone." His shoulders sagged. "I didn't have the heart to try again. Maybe that was a mistake."

"A man has to do what he thinks best."

"I should have known I was in for it when I missed on the blanket. It was the spring after you left. Some of the squaws came around to toss the boys and for the first time I didn't land on my feet. One old squaw patted me on the head as if to say, 'You poor old duffer.' " He sighed heavily. "I'm getting old, Bob."

"Don't say that. I was fixin' to sell you a claim . . . get you out shoveling into a sluice box."

McQuesten emitted a hearty laugh. "I really should."

"I've been trying to sell," Robert said soberly. "Tillie and I are heading for Dubuque come August and I'm trying to turn my claims into cash. If you hear of anybody . . ."

"I'll send them around."

"A couple claims have promise."

"So you're going back to civilization. City life." McQuesten sniffed. "It's comfortable—but no good. I can understand your missus wanting to leave though. I hear you had a real tough winter."

"Yah. The soup got pretty thin for some of the boys. The way people rushed in here—it was crazy."

"Crazy? You don't think it was crazy outside? When the Congress heard you folks were starving they appropriated two hundred thousand dollars for a herd of reindeer to be shipped in here."

"Reindeer?"

"Umm." McQuesten nodded. "More than five hundred were shipped from Norway along with a bunch of herdsmen. Laplanders, Norwegians, and Finns. They docked in New York, came across country by train to Seattle and the last I heard landed at Haines Mission. That was in May."

Robert shook his head in disbelief. "That's dumb. Seven hundred miles of glaciers and canyons ahead of them. What the wolves won't kill, outlaw Indians will. The Indians won't understand that herd is government property."

"Maybe they'll get here in time for next winter's famine."

Loud voices sounded outside and a man came in and shouted, "He's gonna milk her right now!"

"Huh?"

"Some feller brought in a milk cow."

Circled by jeering spectators the Holstein gave a gallon of milk which sold for thirty dollars. Tom Chisholm carried the pail inside the Aurora and began

dispensing it for five dollars a mug. For a few minutes miners forgot whiskey and clamored for the opportunity to be among the first to gulp milk.

"Who brought her in?"

"His name's Miller."

"Cow Miller."

McQuesten nodded. "Don't make no difference what his name is—from now on he's Cow Miller."

Robert didn't learn the man was H. L. Miller until he read it in the Nugget, but by then, as McQuesten predicted, everyone had heard of Cow Miller.

Out for an evening stroll, Mathilda shifted the baby in her arms. "Here, you take him. He's getting too heavy for me. I declare, he's growing like a weed."

"Sure." Robert reached out, took the baby and hoisted him above his head in an attempt to make him giggle.

The infant rewarded him with a smile.

"He looks just like you," Tillie said. "The spittin' image."

"Well, why not?"

"I can't wait to get home to Dubuque to show him off. There'll be a real stampede . . . people coming to see him."

A stormcloud ghosted across Robert's mind, blotting out all joy. He remembered the Nietzsche parlor before the wedding—a rush of people—coming and going—coming and going. Deep within him he felt something wince. "I hope he doesn't become a sideshow attraction."

Their footsteps thudded on the boardwalk and from inside the saloon the heavy-handed thumping on a rinky-tink piano sent forth the strains of a rollicking "Golden Slippers."

"When I was out checking our claims I stopped by

and talked with Fergusson," Robert said. "He sunk two shafts. So far nothing."

"Ohhh . . ."

"He found a little dust at the end of the claim. There was getting to be more—he followed it right to the boundary and had to stop. Across the line belongs to another fellow."

"More bad news."

Robert made a face and shrugged. "I suggested he sink a hole downstream a ways. There used to be a little bend there—maybe some gold settled out. You never can tell. Gold is where you find it. It'll take time. What we need with all our claims is more time. Time to work them . . . time to sell them."

"Time is one thing we don't have."

"Look at all the new construction—the Pioneer and the Dominion. Isn't that a fancy front on the Opera House? Dawson is becoming a modern city, another San Francisco. A person could settle down here."

As Robert spoke, barkers from the various palaces of entertainment came out and shouted blandishments to the crowd, each accompanied by a ragtag band. It was eight o'clock and Dawson nightlife, bold and bawdy, was about to begin, despite a sun as bright as noon.

"Yes, a regular San Francisco," Tillie said. "They've been celebrating every night since the Fourth of July. Is this the way it's going to be."

"I guess so. Tillie . . ." Robert stalled. "I think it's a mistake to pull out now. We ought to stay here. Folks are flocking in here by the thousands. The place is upset but things will settle down. They've organized a telephone and telegraph company and started stringing lines. Time is all we need to sell those claims."

"No." Mathilda glowered. A slow-burning fire

began to simmer in her depths.

"I've been getting a little gold from our claims," Robert went on, unaware that her eyes had become pinpoints of anger. "I can get more. When winter comes we can continue the freighting business . . . reopen the store and make lots of money."

"You'd just spend it on claims. No sir! I'm going back to Dubuque. And that's final."

"But listen, Tillie . . ." Now he saw the corners of her mouth twitch and draw down. Her words burst forth in a shout. "No!" She gestured wildly toward a white building at the north end of Front Street. "I'm not going to have my baby lying in Saint Mary's with typhoid. Or me either. You're breaking your promise!" Rage brought a flush to her face. "All those seven years waiting for you—you didn't come back because you didn't have the money. You stayed in this godforsaken place because you liked it."

"B—but . . ."

"Well, make up your mind!" She reached up and wrested the baby from his arms, turned and started running in the direction of their cabin, tears streaming down her face. "I'm going home and nothing you can say or do is going to stop me!"

"B—but Tillie. I didn't mean . . . I only meant . . ."

Inside the Pavillion Theater the Oatley sisters saluted the hero of Manila with their rendition of "Yankee Dewey Dandy." Robert didn't hear the lyrics—he barely heard the music. Head down, he trudged in the direction Tillie had taken, planning what he would say. *I can tell her that when we get to Dubuque I'll build her a fancy home at the top of Eighth Street. She'd like to hear that.* His gait quickened. "Tillie, wait! Everything's all right. We'll go home!"

A chilly August night, the harbinger of autumn,

Myron Day, and William Kast. Gold Commissioner Fawcett, who was under editorial attack by the *Nugget* and would not long remain at his post, came to give a farewell handshake to his godson.

"He's my godson too," said Frank Kellersman, stepping forward to cup little Robert's face in his massive hand.

Fritz Kloke chuckled. "Now when you get to Dubuque, be sure to give my regards to Dr. Nitzsche and—" A crash, screams, and shouts caused him to break off.

People crowded the wharf in such large numbers that the overloaded pilings shuddered and buckled, flinging spectators and passengers into the icy river—among them Mr. and Mrs. Wentzel. Cold, wet, and bedraggled, the Wentzels scrambled aboard.

"Thank God, you're safe," Tillie said.

"Let's get out of here before the damn river gets me," Mr. Wentzel growled.

"Let me help you," Mathilda said.

An already irate Mrs. Wentzel surveyed her assigned stateroom. "I must say I'm thoroughly dissatisfied with these accommodations. I'm going to complain to the captain."

"I doubt if it'll do much good," Mathilda said. "The commodore and crew are all drunk." She went on deck to complete her farewell to Fritz Kloke.

Presently Commodore Irving staggered to the pilot-house, accompanied by his giant negro manservant. Standing on the superstructure upon which he'd mounted a great golden eagle, the commodore reached up, pulled the whistle cord and held it down. Shrieking, her sternwheel jerked into reverse, the *Yukoner* backed away from the collapsed ~~wharf~~ and lurched forward, racing ahead of the ~~current~~.

Steadying herself at the guardrail, Mathilda ~~watched~~

deeply, her chest straining against her bodice. She exhaled—*underway at last*. Shielding her eyes against the midafternoon sun, she took a last look at the city.

On the eastern horizon mountains formed an arc around the city, broken only by the valley of the Klondike. Above their timbered slopes rose a bald dome scarred by a landslide that in the splendor of sunlight took on an ivory hue. A rocky escarpment dropped to the river and on the opposite bank a precipice less steep formed a gateway through which rushed the waters of the Yukon before the river bent sharply to the left.

At the base of the mountain masses sprawled a boggy plain upon which huddled a jumble of squalid cabins and tents, facing whatever direction struck their owner's fancy. In the saloons and dancehalls lurked gamblers and percentage women, waiting to separate the willing and the unwary from their gold. Boisterous and tawdry, the town never slept.

Mathilda heard a voice at her elbow. "I know you're glad to leave it . . ."

Her lips parted. "Rob-bert." She searched his face for a sign of misgiving at leaving and saw none. "Yes, I'm glad to be going home."

The *Yukoner* steamed past Forty-Mile and Robert pointed out his old cabin and McQuesten's store. "The captain says he'll stop in Circle City for a half hour. When we get there I'll show you my second cabin."

When Circle City hove into view Captain Irving let out a shout and headed the *Yukoner* toward the dock at full throttle. Throwing the controls into reverse at the last moment, he avoided a crash—the *Yukoner* slowed abruptly and barely nudged the dock.

"Wahoo!" cried the captain.

"My word," Mathilda exclaimed. "The fool is still drunk."

EPILOGUE

In the decade following his return to Dubuque, Robert Schoenbeck made three trips to the Klondike to dispose of his holdings.

"And don't buy anything," Mathilda cautioned each time she watched him follow a springtime wanderlust. She had no misgivings about his going and felt not the slightest desire to accompany him. She awaited his return in autumn.

With the exception of a 1921 trip to nearby Maquoketa to attend the funeral of her brother John Mathilda never again left the city limits of Dubuque.

The house the couple planned to build in an exclusive section atop the gigantic Eighth Street hill never became a reality.

"I own a lot," Dr. Nitzsche said. "Why should you buy a lot from someone else? You should buy a lot from me."

His strongwilled suggestion resulted in a Victorian mansion rising against the bluff at 41 Diagonal Street. The doctor occupied an office on the second floor and patients labored up the back stairs for their periodic visits. Despite several bedrooms at the same level, Dr. Nitzsche and Mina lived on the third floor. On the fourth floor an attic in which a tall man could stand erect provided a splendid place for grandchildren to search ancient trunks for relics of the Yukon.

saga of the Klondike is a tale of rags to riches to rags. That's the way it's portrayed in the legends. Confirming to legend, the prototype, Big Alex McDonald—King of the Yukon—abandoned his plush suite in the McDonald Building. Destitute and separated from his wife, Big Alex moved to a slough on Clearwater Creek and in 1909 friends found him dead, slumped over a wood chopping block.

Millionaire Pat Galvan purchased the sternwheeler *Yukoner* before Robert and Mathilda left St. Michael. The first in a series of unfortunate investments. Galvan was bankrupt by 1899. He died of cholera on a voyage to the South Seas.

Charley Anderson—the Lucky Swede—fought over by two dance hall girls, sat them down to play poker. Grace Drummond held the winning hand and agreed to marry him if he deposited fifty thousand dollars in her account. Charley made the deposit. Returning from Europe the Lucky Swede invested in San Francisco real estate prior to the earthquake. Divorced by his poker-playing wife, the Lucky Swede died in 1933, laboring in a sawmill for less than five dollars a day.

What of Win Oler who sold Charley the "worthless" claim? Tormented to the last, Oler died in the Pioneer's Home in Sitka.

He did not sit alone.

Having lavished all the diamonds he could buy in Dawson on Violet Raymond, Antone Stander joined her in wedlock and set out for a cruise to China. Afraid to leave his cabin for fear "someone" would abscond with his gold, Antone refused to go on deck. Before long Violet had picked him clean. Drunkenness cost him what he had left—the Stander Hotel in Seattle. Striking out for the north in search of another bonanza, he made it to the Pioneer's Home.

Saloon owner Harry Ash went insane. Mrs. Ash took her life. Gene Allen, who started the *Klondike Nugget*, died bankrupt. Captain J.E. Hanson, fired by the A-C Company for drunkenness in 1902, found employment as an ordinary seaman and jumped overboard.

Big Bill McPhee, the saloon owner who staked Clarence Berry, followed other stampedes. When his saloon burned in Fairbanks in 1906, Berry immediately wired him money to rebuild. Near the end of his days McPhee depended on Berry for a monthly "pension" check.

Notably, the life of Clarence Berry runs counter to the rags to riches to rags scenario. Finding the largest nugget in the Klondike was symbolic of success. Berry struck a second Eldorado at Esther Creek near Fairbanks and made an additional million from oil. He died in 1930, a multimillionaire, owner of a baseball club and other extensive interests.

Robert Schoenbeck, touted as a millionaire on his return to Dubuque, became a target for wacky inventors, schemers, and con artists. Most of his investments, in his own words, "didn't pan out." His oil ventures resulted in "dry holes" — "if any holes were dug at all." Fortunately, in his portfolio an occasional Ford Ltd. of London or Bell Telephone Company stock prevented total disaster.

Robert joined the Dubuque Telephone Company in 1901 as a collector and solicitor and stayed on as cashier when the company merged into Northwestern Bell. On payday the ritual begun in the Yukon continued. Kneeling at Mathilda's feet, he'd present his wages and say, "There. I've paid you. Now you pay me."

From time to time she redeemed a number of prized gold nuggets which he pledged as collateral for loans.

